

**António Abrantes Almeida:
maestro of Abrunhosa do Mato's wind band**

Ana Margarida Cardoso

Abrunhosa do Mato is a small village in the centre of Portugal. It belongs to Cunha Baixa, one of the towns of Mangualde, in Viseu district. This article is about Abrunhosa's wind band and its master, António de Almeida Abrantes, most known as 'António Simão', because he was Simão's son. Abrunhosa is just a village of Cunha Baixa County, but it was the most populated of the area between 1911 and 1926. Abrunhosa had a band in the first half of the 20th century, one of the six wind bands of Mangualde. Four of them are still active while Abrunhosa do Mato's and Mangualde's bands broke up. Abrunhosa's wind band was founded in 1917, apparently by the priest Aires, António Fonseca, Manuel José and António Lopes Lourenço but mainly by the intention of António Almeida Abrantes, the only musician of the group.¹

António Simão was born in 1883. He learned to play guitar and harmonic, he was a tailor in Cunha Baixa. Around 1900, he went to Lisbon and then to Brazil, where he had achieved more musical knowledge. In 1917 a group of people of Abrunhosa joined to play some instruments and decided to found a philharmonic band. Manuel Primo was the master, but he only spent some months there, so António Simão became the master of the Abrunhosa's band. The rehearsals took place in Antonio's basement, or in another house of the village. He taught music in his home for free to several musicians of the band. They had not any home or office for the rehearsals, they played inside or outside some houses and sometimes barefooted (the shoes were not yet a common reality in the village). It was just in 1929 that the rehearsal's house was built. Someone borrowed him the money to build the house and then António Simão paid the loan and the land.²

We do not know much about this band. I interviewed some people related with the band and its master, took some photos and consulted local journals of

1] Interview by the author with Jorge Abrantes Almeida and António Abrantes Almeida conducted on December 29th, 2016; with António Tavares conducted on April 20th, 2017.

2] See Jorge Abrantes Almeida, *Uma vida cheia*, Lisboa, Chiado, 2016.

the time. Beginning with journals, there were two main periodic publications in that period: «Renascimento» and «Notícias da Beira». «Renascimento» was founded in 1927 and «Notícias da Beira» in 1931. In my research, I could see that «Notícias da Beira» was a more centralized advertising tool of the government of Portugal. In 1933, the Country lived under a dictatorship so this journal defended the main values of union and progress of Mangualde. The new railway lines, the electrification of the town and the telephone cab are some of the progresses emphasized and attributed to the regime of António Salazar, by this journal.³

The cultural tools used to promote the progress in the municipality were the Recreative Club and the Musical Society of Mangualde. The Musical Society was linked to Gremio of Mangualde and included the band. The directors of these institutions were powerful people of Mangualde, owners of the main industries and stores of that time.⁴ So, the Mangualde's philharmonic band was created by the local power. They needed a band, so they hired a master and some musicians (they were paid before each service). The other bands around appeared by the initiative of musicians who played to have fun, entertain their village and for money. Abrunhosa's is an example of that. Everything that they achieved was with their money, service's money or help from the people of Abrunhosa. Even with the support of the institutions, Mangualde's band always lived a hard life to have money to subsist.⁵ We can read in «Notícias da Beira» various calls for helping the band, like this one:

Pedimos encarecidamente a todos os habitantes de Mangualde e em geral, a todos os amigos da terra, que prestem todo o possível auxílio àquela corporação, única que, pela natureza especial das suas funções e frequente contacto com outras terras, levanta e prestigia, perante estranhos, o nome que Mangualde precisa de manter. Auxiliar a nossa banda equivale a praticar um acto de benemérito bairrismo, especialmente agora, quando ela tanto precisa de amparo.⁶

Probably for this reason, the band had various names: starting with Sociedade Filarmónica Luz e Vida ('Philharmonic Society Light and Life'), passing to Banda da Legião Portuguesa ('Portuguese Legion band') with the subside

3] See «Notícias da Beira: tri-mensário de doutrina política e de propaganda regionalista», 1, 1931, n. 1,

4] See João Aires Loureiro, *Mangualde em movimento: crónicas do séc. XX*, Mangualde, Zurão, 2013.

5] Interview by the author with Jorge Abrantes Almeida and António Abrantes Almeida.

6] «Notícias da Beira: tri-mensário de doutrina política e de propaganda regionalista», 1, 1931, n. 11, p. 3.

of Portuguese Legion and finally, Mangualde's band or Banda dos Bombeiros Voluntários de Mangualde ('Mangualde's band or Band of the Firemen of Mangualde'). After that, the band disappeared and turned on one of the jazz groups of the region, Azuraras of Mangualde, which played various nights in town, but not necessarily jazz, because they basically played songs of various countries and mainly portuguese popular music.

Mangualde's band was frequently mentioned in journals, also as their masters, tours, concerts and so on. In addition, it was always described like the «best in town» or even unequalled.⁷ The other bands are not so documented. However, people indicates that Abrunhosa's band was very good and played in various regions around Beira Alta:⁸

[Abrunhosa] possui também uma magnífica filarmónica que nos últimos tempos adquiriu progressos extraordinário, deve-se dizer, sem algum favor, que é uma das melhores dos concelhos limítrofes [...] os seus habitantes têm uma alma que sabe vibrar como os acordes harmoniosos de uma canção, sente o prazer inefável da sensação produzida nos espíritos de requintada sensibilidade por uma música enternecedora de melodia e sentimentos ou cheia de palpitante vivacidade.⁹

António Simão was the key figure of Abrunhosa's band. As I said, he gave music lessons to the musicians, he paid the band's house and it was his godfather who gave them money to buy new instruments in 1930. António Simão married twice. He had four children from the first marriage and then he married the sister of his first wife and had four more children. However, people say that he had three or four children more outside both marriages, but he did not assume that during his life.¹⁰ Five of his eight assumed children were band musicians. Two girls did not take part of the band because they were female and his younger child was admitted in an Intern College in Mangualde, so he couldn't be an element of the band.¹¹

António do Simão, de bigodes à antiga portuguesa, a impor respeito e simpatia, e palpitante entusiasmo e boa vontade pela filarmónica, que a dirige incumbindo-lhe sempre harmonia e expressão, graça e alegria, simplicidade encantadora sem prejuízo da rigorosa execução musical. [...] Atualmente já é conhecido em toda a região, não havendo festa nenhuma onde

7] See «Notícias da Beira: tri-mensário de doutrina política e de propaganda regionalista», 9, 1931, p. 1.

8] Name given to the region where the municipality is located.

9] «Renascimento», 12, 1929, p. 3.

10] Interview by the author with António Tavares.

11] Interview by the author with Lena Abrantes Almeida and António Abrantes Almeida conducted on December 29th, 2016.

ela vá que não marque pela sua bela apresentação, pelo seu repertório variado e pela educação e boa postura dos seus membros.¹²

One of his children, Ilídio Abrantes Almeida, probably had a perfect pitch, but we don't know if it was just a good relative pitch. We know that he replaced his father on music lessons and on band conduction.¹³ Besides the music, António Simão gave an important contribution to the village. One of the major increments was the electrification of Abrunhosa. Mangualde had already light and telephone but Abrunhosa's had not yet. The light could come from Viseu (North) or from Seia, Serra da Estrela (South). António Simão knew that there was not political desire from Mangualde to have light in Abrunhosa, so he went by bicycle to Seia to talk with the electricity company director and to push the light from the Mondego River side, as illustrated on the map at Fig. 1.¹⁴

As treasurer of Cunha Baixa's government, he also organized the territory. He divided and sold the lands and extended the streets, and for that he ordered the destruction of balconies. He made that, because in those streets just passed pairs of oxen. He was also the chief of local post office and telephone, so he received people that wanted to communicate by letter or phone with other parts of the country or even with families on Portuguese Colonial lands. He also established the water points of Abrunhosa, where people could collect water for daily life. He was a tailor too.¹⁵

Nowadays, this story can seem a romance but we are talking about a very poor village in the inner Portugal, in the beginning of 20th century. Things like telephone, light, water or even shoes were not a reality and it was on that period that Abrunhosa's band lived. The railway was, in fact, a progress for the village and the region. The Beira Alta line was the main way of transport for that region, it allowed the communication with Lisbon, other cities in the country and with Spain. My interviewed said that philharmonic bands went to their services by foot, by bicycle or riding horses.¹⁶ After the railway, they went by train. Cars and bus just appeared many years later.

We have some repertoires of the band which thanks to António's son. There was a periodic publication of music for bands, the «Philarmonico Portuguez» and the major part of this repertoire was bought on that collection. The band

12] «Renascimento», 12, 1929, p. 3.

13] Interview by the author with António Tavares.

14] Interviews by the author with Lena Abrantes Almeida and António Abrantes Almeida, and with António Tavares.

15] See *Ibidem*.

16] See *Ibidem*.

FIG. 1. Alternatives to the route of light until Abrunhosa (map created by the author).



consulted that publication, so they were able to play new pasodoble, passacaglias, valsas and more. Apparently, António Simão went several times to Lisbon to buy music to play it with the band. It was in one of that travels that he earned a hymn for the band, composed by José Joaquim de Almeida.

The Abrunhosa's band broke up in the 1940's, the specific year is not certain, the emigration seems the main cause. Abrunhosa was a very poor village, people of Abrunhosa had technical professions like bricklayer, carpenter or shoemaker (later), so they had not too much food to feed themselves.¹⁷ However, in the 1940's started another wave of emigration, that affected the band. My interviewed described emigration in the village like almost epidemic, because if one family came back richer from Brazil, the neighbours would emigrate too. Also colonies were described on journals like «the promised land», so emigration seemed to be the solution to lead a better life: in 1940, about twenty musicians of the band emigrated to Congo Belga. In Abrunhosa some musicians tried

17] Interview by the author with Lena Abrantes Almeida and António Abrantes Almeida.

FIG. 2. Irmãos Abrantes band (private collection of António Tavares).



to teach music to young people but emigration was too heavy and the most experienced musicians had left. Some of them were António Simão's sons.¹⁸ After that, just some jazz groups remained in the village, made of people who came back from colonies, like Irmãos Abrantes band. We can see, in Fig. 2, Amilcar, Virgílio and Ilídio Abrantes Almeida (António Simão's sons).¹⁹

In the 1960's and 1970's, and after the Second World War, people emigrated to Germany, and France, so nowadays in Abrunhosa live just old people and there are a lot of empty houses owned by emigrated people that come back just in vacations.

In conclusion, the emigration was a severe cause of the dissolution of Abrunhosa's band and many others associations. Especially in small villages, where these associations are made by individual initiatives, if there is no people, there is no music, art or associations. This is just a chapter of a long study about philharmonic bands in Mangualde and in Portugal, it leads us to the reflection about the future of local practices and the role of individuals in specific contexts.

18] Valentim da Silva, *Concelho de Mangualde: antigo concelho de Azurara da Beira*, Mangualde, Câmara Municipal de Mangualde, 2008.

19] Interview by the author with António Tavares.