

Prelude

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MASTERWORKS #5:

LATIN LOVERS • FEBRUARY 15-17, 2019

Exposing the passionate tango: the evolution of an emotional and deeply admired art form that traveled from Argentinian brothels to the classical orchestra stage.



Cuadros de Bailarines Tango - Leonid Afremov

The tango, one of the most seductive partner dances that began between 1870 and 1880, was born in the cabarets and brothels of the port of Rio de la Plata, on the border between Argentina and Uruguay.ⁱ Musicians began to improvise music to a new way of moving, and the new dance style was accented with rhythm and a defined melody.ⁱⁱ Approximately forty years earlier in the 1840s, an instrument known as the bandoneonⁱⁱⁱ had been invented in Germany and quickly made its way to Argentina.^{iv} The bandoneon soon became the distinctive soul and voice of the tango.^v Tango is arguably one of the most important cultural gifts from Argentina to the world.^{vi}



Bandoneon

The first well-known tango, *El Choclo*, was written in 1905 by Angel Villoldo, a singer with a guitar.^{vii} Villoldo is one of the first great tango artists we can name today, and the tune is easily recognized. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0lrc_WTvdY In 1916, Roberto Firpo, a pianist and leader of one of the most successful tango bands of the period, created the standard tango sextet consisting of two bandoneones, two violins, piano and double bass.^{viii} Inspired by a march composed by a young Uruguayan named Gerardo Mattos Rodriguez, Firpo rearranged the piece as a tango, and the result, *La Cumparsita*, is likely the most famous tango of all time.^{ix} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yoLXINtBwE>

After its birth in the poorest neighborhoods, the tango was carried abroad by dancers and musicians. The "golden age" of tango, the 1940's in Argentina, were the years of great dance halls, countless tango radio shows, and hundreds of big bands with famous singers and musicians.^x



Astor Piazzolla

Astor Piazzolla, the composer credited with the modern transformation of the tango, originally didn't care much for the art form.^{xi} Born in Argentina in 1921, Astor grew up in New York City, and his first dream was to be a classical musician.^{xii} To please his father, a tango fan who bought his son a bandoneon from a Greenwich Village pawnshop, eight-year old Astor learned to play the instrument.^{xiii} Striving to honor his father, 11-year old Astor composed a tango, *La Catinga*, but at the same time, began formal piano lessons with Bella Wilda, a student of Rachmaninoff.^{xiv} His studies were disrupted at age 15, when the family moved back to Argentina.^{xv} Determined to pursue classical training, at the age of 17, Astor moved to Buenos Aires to study with Alberto Ginaste, a classical music composer and Raúl Spivak, a classical pianist.^{xvi} The year was 1946, but tango and classical music, two very different art forms, continued to pull Piazzolla in vastly different directions. While studying and composing classical music, Astor simultaneously formed his own orchestra and composed his first formal tango, *El Desbande*.^{xvii}

Torn between the two art forms, Astor's search to create his own unique style bordered on obsessive. In his desperation, he abandoned tango and the bandoneon completely and instead focused his studies on Bartok and Stravinsky.^{xviii}

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Argentinian influences continued to seep into Piazzolla's compositions. In 1951, he won a grant from the French government to study in Paris, but his award-winning piece, *Buenos Aires Symphony*, caused a near-riot in the audience, provoked by his inclusion of multiple bandoneons in a classical orchestra.^{xxix} As a recipient of the grant, he traveled to Paris to study composition with famed teacher, Nadia Boulanger.^{xx} Just as she had encouraged Gershwin to stay true to his roots and existing style,^{xxi} Boulanger urged the 32-year old Piazzolla to continue his experimentation with the tango. With Boulanger's encouragement, Piazzolla combined his two musical passions, classical and tango.^{xxii} What was once a choice between "sophisticated music" or "tango" would now be sophisticated music AND tango.^{xxiii}

Upon Piazzolla's return to Argentina in 1955, he formed *Octeto Buenos Aires*, a tango octet that included two bandoneons and electric guitar.^{xxiv} With



Quinteto. Nuevo - Tango

his new ensemble, he introduced the world to his *nuevo tango*, incorporating elements of jazz and classical music into traditional tango.^{xxv}

His music departed sharply from the traditional tango format, much to the criticism of tango traditionalists, but he continued to forge his own path, forming his influential *Quinteto Nuevo Tango* in 1960.^{xxvi}

"Traditional tango listeners hated me," he recalled many years later. "I introduced fugues, counterpoint and other irreverences. People thought I was going crazy. All the tango critics and the radio stations of Buenos Aires called me a clown, they said my music was 'paranoiac'. And they made me popular. The young people who had lost interest in tango started listening to me. It was a war of one against all, but in 10 years, the war was won."^{xxvii}

After living in Europe for more than a decade, Piazzolla returned to live in Argentina in 1985, and passed away on July 4, 1992.^{xxviii}

Today, with the influence of Piazzolla, tango is at its highest popularity in over 50 years.^{xxix} The near disappearance of the tango coincided with the darkest periods in the social and political history of Argentina. The "años de plomo" (the lead years) between 1955 and 1980 saw severe military dictatorships.^{xxx} But with the return to democracy in 1983, a new generation



Forever Tango

launched itself on a cultural adventure, determined to recover and revive tango. The young people who worked to revive tango in the 1980s were lucky enough to know the last of the *tangueros*, the musicians and dancers steeped in the art. The older generation shared their art, and an unprecedented generational exchange occurred. The

phenomenon was launched onto the world stage in the late 1980s thanks to the Broadway hit, *Tango Argentino*,^{xxxi} which was closely followed by *Forever Tango*, a show presented in Paris, London and on Broadway.^{xxxii} The world looks to Buenos Aires, where tango is fully alive, as new artists continue to emerge, and the art form continues its evolution.

Join us!

Please join the Hartford Symphony Orchestra for **Latin Lovers**, February 15 - 17, 2019. Our Masterworks concert features music inspired by or composed by our Latin American neighbors, with selections that include *El Salón Mexico* by Aaron Copland, *Libertango* and *Aconcagua* by Astor Piazzolla and more. We predict you'll find it difficult to listen without tapping your toes or moving with the beat and can almost guarantee you'll leave the hall whistling, humming and wishing for more!



WONDERING HOW THE MUSIC WILL SOUND?

Try HSO'S Listening Guide, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage – and more!

Aaron Copland conducts the New York Philharmonic in his own piece, *El Salón Mexico*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qj-98yBfEIO>

Astor Piazzolla's *Libertango* for full orchestra:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kdhTodxH7Gw>

Astor Piazzolla's *Aconcagua*, Concerto for Bandoneon and Orchestra:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vBKAgbw32Tw>

Gabriela Lena Frank's *Three Latin American Dances*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mDT2hXWpZE>

Gustavo Dudamel conducts *Danzón No. 2* by Arturo Márquez:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgcrLj2DAkM>

Are you starting to enjoy music with that certain "latin" feel? If yes, you'll enjoy:
 Piazzolla's *Oblivion*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txh31SobxSI>

And here's an introduction to our soloist, Julien Labro:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQSF9OK3Uno>

Piazzolla's *Buenos Aires Symphony*, which led to his journey to Paris:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tU86b5M6KyM>

And here is a clip featuring Astor Piazzolla playing the bandoneon.^{xxxiii}
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3Sfv-Uyzc0>

And some very special tangos, featured in famous movies:

A clip from *Scent of a Woman*, featuring the tango *Por Una Cabeza*, written in 1935 by Carlos Gardel and Alfredo Le Pera:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2zTd_YwTvo

A clip from the end of *True Lies*, featuring the same tango, *Por Una Cabeza*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ydRwCf9Qyw>



Libertango

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This issue of *Prelude* deliberately does not include our usual recording recommendations from Coleman Casey, HSO's dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, who explained that the new music and multiple selections posed unique challenges. But his suggestions will return with our next Masterworks, Mozart Meets Klezmer.



REFERENCES

- i. <https://uniontanguera.com/history-of-tango/>
- ii. Ibid
- iii. The bandoneon is a button accordion, with rows of buttons instead of piano keys. Each button produces different pitches, and each row is tuned to a specific key. The button accordion was developed first, and the piano-key version was popularized by the manufacturer's marketing strategy, with an appeal to those who already knew how to play the piano. <http://squeezeboxstories.com/background/accordion-101-types-of-the-accordion>
- iv. <https://www.argentina-tango.com/bandoneon.htm>
- v. <http://www.bandoneon.co.uk/faq>
- vi. <https://uniontanguera.com/history-of-tango/>
- vii. http://www.totaltango.com/acatalog/tango_brief_intro_91.html
- viii. Ibid
- ix. Ibid
- x. <https://uniontanguera.com/history-of-tango/>
- xi. <https://www.miamiherald.com/entertainment/article5571000.html>
- xii. Ibid
- xiii. <http://blog.sadlerswells.com/timeline-of-the-great-tango-composer-astor-piazzolla>
- xiv. Ibid
- xv. Ibid
- xvi. Ibid
- xvii. Ibid
- xviii. <http://www.piazzola.org/biography/biography-english.html>
- xix. <http://blog.sadlerswells.com/timeline-of-the-great-tango-composer-astor-piazzolla>
- xx. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Astor-Piazzolla>
- xxi. <http://www.unconservatory.org/celam/gershwinbio.html>
- xxii. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Astor-Piazzolla>
- xxiii. <http://www.piazzola.org/biography/biography-english.html>
- xxiv. <http://blog.sadlerswells.com/timeline-of-the-great-tango-composer-astor-piazzolla>
- xxv. Ibid
- xxvi. <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/07/06/obituaries/astor-piazzolla-71-tango-s-modern-master-dies.html>
- xxvii. Ibid
- xxviii. Ibid
- xxix. <https://uniontanguera.com/history-of-tango/>
- xxx. Ibid
- xxxi. <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/12/19/theater/tango-argentino-the-season-s-improbable-hit.html>
- xxxii. <https://variety.com/1994/legit/reviews/forever-tango-the-eternal-dance-1200437923/>
- xxxiii. Although most bandoneonistas play sitting down, Piazzolla played the instrument while standing, putting one leg on a chair, a trait that characterized him on the music scene. <http://www.piazzola.org/biography/biography-english.html>