

Astor Piazzolla

This is the story of travel, travail and triumph in the life of an Argentine musician, Astor Pantaléon Piazzolla. His travels were two-fold: across the continents and through many kinds of music. That he was able eventually to combine these musical strands into something new and distinctively his own was his triumph, but it was long-delayed and there were many travails along the way.

Argentina's spectacular 19th century boom had attracted millions of migrants, including Piazzolla's Italian grandparents. By the time of Piazzolla's birth in 1921, it was long over, but the rich ethnic mix it created had left a musical legacy. In the brothels of Buenos Aires, the music and dance of Spain, Cuba and Italy had fused with that of the *gauchos* and Afro-Argentine ex-slaves to create a new dance form, the tango. Its early manifestations were blatantly sexual and reeked too much of the bordello to be tolerated in polite society. But after some refinement in the salons of Paris it emerged in 1912 to sweep the world. Argentina especially went wild for the tango and its quintessential instrument, the *bandoneón*, an odd form of concertina with a characteristic tone. A public holiday, July 11, was declared *Bandoneón Day*, and tango cafés, dance halls and cabaret houses sprang up everywhere to cater for every social stratum. Astor's father, Vincente, was an enthusiastic *tanguero* and dreamed that his son would become a bandoneonist. His dream came true but hardly in the way he imagined.

It was with great reluctance that Vincente took his family away from this lively scene to search for prosperity in New York and it almost proved disastrous for his son. Vincente found work in a mafia-owned barber-shop in Greenwich Village. Late in life, Piazzolla recalled* all kinds of mayhem including the bombing of a rival barber-shop and multiple murder at the local synagogue. He lived, he said, 'surrounded by everything you saw in *The Godfather* or *The Untouchables*.

The toughness required to survive in this environment despite his small size and the limp due to a congenitally weak right leg, no doubt stood him in good stead in later life, but things almost went too far. He joined an Italian street gang and was, he said later, 'violent and truly bad', nicknamed 'Lefty' for the ferocious punch with which he won so many fights, The life of crime

that claimed most of his companions could easily have claimed him too and there were few signs of the musical talent that eventually proved his salvation.

According to Piazzolla, the only useful outcome of a year's lessons with an Italian music teacher was a wonderful recipe for spaghetti sauce! As for the tango records his homesick father played at home, he was merely irritated by the constant repetition. Even Vincente's gift of a *bandoneón* rescued from a pawnshop failed to ignite any spark and the instrument that was eventually to become the centre of Piazzolla's creative life, lay unused in a cupboard.

The family decision to return to Mar del Plata in 1929 was another painful episode. Astor found himself a stranger in his own land, oddly dressed, thinking in English and speaking what he described as 'pidgin Spanish'. The famous punch soon overcame the schoolyard mockery, but his loneliness may explain his new interest in the despised *bandoneón*. With Argentina's tango fever at its height, he perhaps hoped to gain from his peers the respect properly accorded a bandoneonist. He applied himself seriously to lessons on this notoriously difficult instrument, with its awkward layout of keys, a tone that varies markedly depending on whether the bellows are opening or closing and its unwieldy 10 kilogram weight. Astoundingly, within little more than a year, when economic hardship once more drove the family back to New York, the 10 year-old boy was a reasonably competent player and ready for two more formative experiences the city would fortuitously provide.

First came an encounter in 1933 with the music of Bach. It was played by a neighbour, Béla Wilda, a young professional pianist, and it held the boy spellbound. This was the moment, he said, when he truly discovered music. A deal was soon done: pasta meals for the impecunious Wilda, piano lessons for Astor. The wise teacher fed the boy's enthusiasm by adapting suitable pieces for the *bandoneón* and Bach was his life-time idol.

Young Astor enjoyed some celebrity among the small Latin-American community in New York for his *bandoneón* playing but preferred classics or folksongs and found little to love in the tango until he encountered Carlos Gardel. Adored worldwide both as a film star and as the greatest exponent of tango song, he came to New York in 1933 for a year of stage appearances and filming. He took a fatherly interest in the young musician,

showing him around town and organising a brief appearance in one of his own films. But when he asked the boy to accompany him Piazzolla had to learn tango even though, by his own testimony, his head remained full of Bach.

But tango is not for young boys. Tango dance, even in its sanitised form is essentially sexual. Tango song is mostly about the vagaries of love. By the time the family returned once more to Argentina, Piazzolla was 16. He 'already knew the troubles of the heart' and the tango had acquired real meaning for him, without diminishing his love of Bach, Mozart and Gershwin. By now a highly competent player, he soon began working in tango orchestras in his home city and composing tangos of his own.

Within three years he was playing in one of Buenos Aires finest tango orchestras alongside its director, Anibal Troilo, a famous exponent of the *bandoneón*. He wrote arrangements for the band, but attempts to introduce greater harmonic and textural sophistication were not welcomed by Troilo or the singers and dancers whom the orchestra accompanied. The core of the problem, as Piazzolla later expressed it, was that to him 'tango was for the ears not the feet' and he found the conventional tango scene a musical straitjacket.

At 20 years old, with hardly any formal training in composition, but with his New York-bred boldness he approached Artur Rubinstein with what he called a piano concerto. Impressed but amused by the lack of any orchestral accompaniment, Rubinstein personally arranged for composition lessons with Alberto Ginastera, now known as Argentina's greatest composer.

Piazzolla's struggle to acquire a sound musical training was to continue with various teachers for 14 years. Fitted into the long hours and late nights of a tango musician's life, it is another example of his formidable persistence. In 1946, increasingly frustrated by the simplistic music he had to perform, Piazzolla formed his own orchestra in order to experiment with his new technical expertise. By now, Bartók and Stravinsky had joined Bach among his idols. His percussive accents, dissonant and elaborate harmonies, complicated formal structures and counterpoint, even full-blown fugues, baffled and infuriated traditional *tangueros* who objected loudly to this 'concert tango.' Disillusioned, he abandoned the bankrupt enterprise in 1949, along with the *bandoneón*, devoting himself to composition, arranging and writing film scores.

The most important turning point in his journey came in 1953 when he entered the Sevitzky Prize Competition. In spite of a riot incited by concertgoers objecting to the inclusion of two *bandoneóns* in the score, his *Buenos Aires Symphony* won the first prize which included a year's study in Paris with Nadia Boulanger.

Boulanger, the famously perceptive teacher of many 20th century composers, found Piazzolla's orchestral compositions well-crafted but lacking in any personal creative spark. Reluctant to confess his musical past to this patrician intellectual, he never forgot her words when he at last played her one of his tango compositions. "Here is the true Piazzolla – do not ever leave him". It was the imprimatur he needed. He reclaimed the *bandoneón* once more from the closet and began writing prolifically in search of a style that would combine the essence of tango with sophistication and profundity. It was a search that evoked an astonishing variety of music in many genres, but it condemned him to penury for many years.

On his return to Buenos Aires in 1954, Piazzolla formed an Octet (two *bandoneóns*, two violins, cello, bass, piano and electric guitar) for which he composed some of his most harmonically adventurous music. For many, including Piazzolla, this represents the beginning of Tango Nuevo. A minority, aware of the genre's decline into commercial insipidity, saw it as urgently needed revitalisation: traditionalists regarded it as sacrilege. The composer was reviled and threatened: even taxi drivers ostracised him. Work was scarce and Piazzolla retreated to New York for two years. He afterwards referred to his experiment there with Jazz Tango as a monstrosity and when his father died, the stricken Piazzolla returned to Buenos Aires once more.

The Quintet he now formed was the most famous of his bands and began to earn him recognition, although more outside Argentina than within. Money was still scarce, however. Available venues and takings were mostly small and it was necessary to work at a furious pace. This did not stop him composing an extraordinary range of music. In the next decade or so, besides film scores and tango nuevo pieces for the quintet, he wrote *Tres Tangos Sinfonicos*, the operetta *Maria de Buenos Aires* and even, after moving to Paris in 1970, an oratorio.

A heart attack in 1973 seemed only to spur him on. He moved to Italy when an Italian agent offered him contracts that at last provided some financial security and entered his most popular phase. It is the period of his recordings with jazz musicians Gerry Mulligan and Gary Burton, an electronic ensemble playing what some called jazz-rock, and from 1978 onwards, the great Quintet with which he toured Europe, Japan, the US and South America to rising acclaim. Great classical musicians such as Gidon Kremer, Daniel Barenboim and Emmanuel Ax sought out his concerts and began performing his music. He wrote commissioned works for the Kronos Quartet and Rostropovich and choreographers all over the world made ballets on his music and since his death in 1992 the interest seems only to have intensified.

‘Maestro, now the concert’s over, why don’t you play a tango’ was a question Piazzolla encountered more than once. It is true that in his 1000 or so works, he not only introduced much that was foreign to the tango, but often abandoned its traditional features: the repetitious bass rhythm, the fixed tempo and even the characteristic duple metre. So what is left? One of his more moderate replies to the question was ‘my music smells of tango’. He meant the underlying earthiness, the melancholy, the fatalism, the sense of life’s impermanence that is the essence of this music from the slums and that is enshrined in the unique voice of his beloved *bandoneón*, without which tango is possible but always somewhat diminished. In his last years Piazzolla expressed the hope that his music would still survive in 2020 and maybe in 3000. The chances seem as good as those of the human race.

Christopher Sears © 2003
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