

His life and oeuvre

Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992)

Astor Pantaleón Piazzolla was born in the city of Mar del Plata, Argentina, on March 11, 1921. His grandparents had emigrated from the north and south of Italy: from Lucca in Tuscany, and Trani in the Puglia region. Thus, Astor liked to joke with Osvaldo Pugliese that he was also a “pugliese”.

Astor’s parents, Vicente Piazzolla and Asunta Manetti, moved the family to New York when he was four years old. Therefore, Astor grew up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and he learned the tango listening to his father’s records of Carlos Gardel and Julio de Caro.

Astor's father played the accordion and guitar. He occasionally performed in Italian festivals and he composed at least one tango.¹ When Astor was eight years old, his father bought him a second-hand bandoneon. As he told the story, Octavio Manetti, one of his uncles, was visiting New York when they saw the squeezebox in a shop window on sale for \$ 18. When the bandoneon was given to him, Astor remembered, he gazed at it a long time before daring to press the buttons. Astor wanted a baseball bat....

During the Depression, the Piazzollas returned to Mar del Plata for a few months. Astor took some bandoneon lessons with the Pauloni brothers, learning basic techniques as well as some *yeites tangueros* (tricks of playing). On return to New York, Piazzolla and a friend began making frequent visits to Harlem to listen to Cab Calloway and Duke Ellington. Years later, he recalled how they would stand outside Cotton Club, to hear Calloway performing.² By this time, Astor was studying music with the Argentine pianist Andrés D’Aquila, and a few months later he began lessons with Terig Tucci, a bandoneonist and arranger. His father sent him to a harmonica academy, and Astor played the bandoneon in public several times.

A coincidence was decisive in Astor's life: Béla Wilda, a disciple of Serge Rachmaninoff, happened to live near the Piazzollas. Astor got to know him, and he listened to him playing Bach for hours. This experience inspired him to learn to play Bach and Chopin on the bandoneon.

There were many other influences in Astor's musical development. As a boy, he was paid \$25 to play a newspaper vendor in the film *El día que me quieras* (1935), which starred the famous tango singer Carlos Gardel. Years later, Piazzolla said “Everything gets under your skin! My rhythm accents are even like the Jewish popular music I heard at weddings”.³ Indeed, the 3-3-2 rhythmic arrangement is found in klezmer music. This pattern resembles the 3-3-2 accents –with emphasis on the first, fourth and sixth eighth notes in a 4/ 4 bar– that derive from the *milonga* and the *habanera*, which gave rise to tango.

The Piazzollas finally returned to Mar del Plata in 1937, when Astor was sixteen. There he heard hours of tango music on the radio, mainly the bands conducted by Julio De Caro, Osvaldo Pugliese, Pedro Maffia, Pedro Laurenz, Elvino Vardaro, Miguel Caló, Alfredo Gobbi and Ciriaco Ortiz. These musicians had created new arrangements for traditional tango melodies, adding sophisticated harmony and counterpoint.

Astor continued his piano studies in Mar del Plata until he was eighteen, and then moved to Buenos Aires, becoming a bandoneonist for several tango bands. Every night he would go to the Café Germinal

to listen to Aníbal “Pichuco” Troilo. One night, Troilo needed an alternative bandoneonist, so he asked Piazzolla to audition. He performed Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and was hired on the spot.

Piazzolla worked with Troilo as a bandoneonist and arranger for five years, from 1939 through 1944. They sometimes disagreed: Troilo preferred simplicity and danceable music, and Piazzolla was always trying to incorporate intricate arrangements. Troilo would tell him flatly: “No, my boy, that isn't tango”. Although Troilo's disapproval hurt him, Astor continued to play as he wished. They differed even in playing style: Troilo sat and held the bandoneon in the traditional manner, but Piazzolla stood and balanced the instrument on his leg.

The pianist Arthur Rubinstein was visiting Buenos Aires in 1940. Astor rang his doorbell and presented him with one of his scores. Rubinstein suggested him to study with the leading Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera, who was Piazzolla's contemporary. Piazzolla became Ginastera's first pupil, and he directed Astor to analyze scores by Stravinsky and Bartók. Bartók had systematically explored Hungarian peasant music but created a universal music that reflected the influences of Liszt, Strauss, Debussy, and Stravinsky.⁴

In 1942, Piazzolla married Odette (Dedé) Wolff, and they had two children: Diana Irene was born in 1943 and Daniel Hugo in 1945. (Diana died on July 1, 2009).

Piazzolla had become an intensely dedicated and disciplined musician, and in 1946 he formed his first band. Although he played in many nightspots, he never lost his distaste for them and resisted the lifestyle of his peer group. Sometimes, after playing with Troilo at the Tibidabo until four in the morning, he would attend rehearsals three hours later with the Orquesta Filarmónica at the Colón Opera House. Piazzolla earnestly wanted to master classical composition.

Piazzolla's band continued to perform in the city and suburbs, however, he dissolved it in mid-1949.⁵ The 1940s became the golden decade of the tango, and Piazzolla was its revolutionary. By the early 1950s, Piazzolla had written several classical works. He stopped playing the bandoneon for a few years and devoted himself to writing film music.

In 1953, the German conductor and violinist Herman Scherchen visited Buenos Aires. Scherchen had founded the Berlin Society for New Music in 1918 and was an ardent defender of twentieth century music, especially that of Schoenberg and Webern. Piazzolla took some lessons in orchestration from him. Soon after, he competed for the Fabien Sevitsky Prize and won a one-year scholarship to study with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. At the same time, his wife Dedé won an award to study with André Lohte, an influential teacher and critic of modern art who founded the Montparnasse Academy. Thus, the family moved to the City of Light in 1954.

Studying with Nadia Boulanger was an extraordinary opportunity for Piazzolla. Copland, Harris, Thomson, Carter, Quincy Jones, Berkeley and Piston are among her disciples. Boulanger soon told Piazzolla that his music was “well written but lacked feeling” —a verdict she handed out to most pupils. This disheartened Piazzolla greatly, and for a while he walked the streets and poured out his woes to friends. However, Boulanger soon forced him out of his malaise by asking about the music he played in Argentina. When Piazzolla reluctantly mentioned the tango, she claimed “I love that music! But you don't play the piano to perform tangos. What instrument do you play?”. Piazzolla unenthusiastically told her he played the bandoneon. Boulanger reassured him saying she had heard this instrument in music

by Kurt Weill, and that Stravinsky himself appreciated its qualities. Then she persuaded Piazzolla to play one of his tangos on the piano, and he chose *Triunfal*. At the eighth bar, Boulanger took him by the hands and told him firmly: "This is Piazzolla! Don't ever leave it!"⁶

Piazzolla recorded his new tangos with a string orchestra drawn from the Paris Opera. The Argentine jazz pianist Lalo Schifrin also featured in the group, but he soon had to go on tour, and was replaced by Martial Solal, the greatest European jazz pianist. In Europe, Piazzolla heard, among other bands, Gerry Mulligan and his ensemble. Baritone saxophonist and arranger, Mulligan is among the most versatile figures in modern jazz. Piazzolla recalled "the happiness onstage. It was like a party: the sax played, the drums played, the whole thing passed to the trombone; they were happy".⁷

To free tango from its traditional patterns, Piazzolla began to use novel tone-colors and rhythms, as well as dissonant harmonies to give the music more nuances. "Swing" was the word Piazzolla used to mean rhythmic consciousness. The classical tango sextet consisted of two bandoneons, two violins, double bass, and piano. Piazzolla enlarged it with a cello and an electric guitar, and in 1955 he founded the Octeto Buenos Aires. Never before had a tango ensemble incorporated an electric guitar. The reactions were so angry that Horacio Malvicino, the electric guitarist in the Octet, recalls even receiving death threats.

In 1957, after hearing Bartók's *Second Violin Concerto*, Piazzolla composed *Tres minutos con la realidad*, which is somewhat reminiscent of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. "The overriding feature of Stravinsky's from first to last is rhythm ... from the primitive (*Les Noces*) to the sophisticated (*Rite of Spring*) (...) [rhythm] is the mainspring of his work".⁸

Buenos Aires in the late 1950s was not an ideal setting for Piazzolla to create and spread his music. Disheartened, he moved to New York in early 1958. A few months later, Dedé, Daniel, and Diana followed him. Several agents and music publishers liked the music Piazzolla showed them, and they suggested tailoring it to American taste. This is how an LP was planned.⁹

While living in New York, Piazzolla was able to meet and work with outstanding popular musicians like Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, Ray Noble, and Paul Whiteman. Johnny Richards, a pioneer of progressive jazz, asked permission to hear his records. Piazzolla visited Birdland, the famous club on Broadway, several times. An admirer of cool jazz, he felt identified with this movement, in which the improvised counterpoint underwent a revival. Piazzolla incorporated these resources in his music and its musicians also had some freedom to improvise, which was quite unusual in traditional tango. In Argentina, traditional *tangueros* perceived his music as emotionally cool, although this is far from true. Drama, passion, melancholy and nostalgia are always present in Piazzolla's music. He particularly admired Stan Getz, Miles Davis, Stan Kenton, Gil Evans, the Modern Jazz Quartet, George Shearing, and Dave Brubeck.

On one occasion, Piazzolla attended a reception for Victoria Ocampo, the *grand dame* of Argentine letters, at the Metropolitan Club in New York. Igor Stravinsky was among her friends. Piazzolla recalled the entrance to the room of the fragile-looking Stravinsky: "it was like seeing God". When finally introduced, he managed to stammer, "Maestro, I am a long-distance pupil of yours"¹⁰ and Stravinsky gave him a warm handshake.

In late 1959, Piazzolla learned that his father had died in Mar del Plata. After returning to New York from Puerto Rico, he went into complete isolation and composed *Adiós, Nonino*, which became his best-

known work. Throughout his life, Piazzolla wrote at least twenty arrangements of this piece. His favorites were those written for his Noneto, group formed in the early 1970s, and for his two Quintets.¹¹ (The piano versions written for the First and Second Quintets differ. The introduction written for Dante Amicarelli is more of the tango, while the version for Pablo Ziegler is more rhapsodic).

On returning to Buenos Aires in 1960, Piazzolla started the Quinteto Nuevo Tango, consisting of bandoneon, piano, violin, guitar and double bass. His most productive period was the 1960s, when he also developed new forms. During this decade, Piazzolla's music began to attract worldwide attention for its distinctive qualities. His compositions were a combination of contrapuntal voices and instruments, each of significance in itself, resulting in a coherent texture. Bach, the greatest master of polyphonic music, was perhaps Piazzolla's greatest model. Piazzolla composed for his soloists, a community of musicians like him, but also for audiences; although, in the end, he composed and performed primarily for himself.

Several explosive confrontations with the press brought Piazzolla considerable notoriety during these years, and his private life was in turmoil. Finally, in February of 1966, Piazzolla left Dedé and their children. The rupture of his marriage took family and friends by surprise. Piazzolla did not fully recover his emotional stability for at least ten years.

The Club 676, where Piazzolla and his Quintet played every night, made its mark in Buenos Aires. It became a lively meeting-place for Argentine musicians and foreign visitors. The Israel Chamber Orchestra, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Vegh Quartet, the Modern Jazz Quartet, Tommy Dorsey and his band and Brazilian stars such as Mayssa Matarazzo, João Gilberto and Os Cariocas were among them. The Stan Getz Quartet played in September 1965. During the evening, Getz asked a young Gary Burton to play *My Funny Valentine* as a solo. Piazzolla marveled at Burton's original style of improvisation, which is quite distinct from other vibraphonists, reminiscent of both country music and Latin styles.¹²

In 1967, Piazzolla began a collaboration with the talented poet Horacio Ferrer. Their first major work was the opera *María de Buenos Aires*. The premiere performance starred the singer Amelita Baltar, who became Piazzolla's companion for the next six and a half years. In 1969 they scored an amazing hit with the song *Balada para un loco*, which became popular throughout Latin America. This song had nothing in common with traditional tango song, in theme, style, rhyme or rhythm. Its surreal, witty and very contemporary lyrics tell a story of unusual length. This was so far from the traditional model that it drew a line forever between the pre-Piazzolla and the post-Piazzolla tango. Even today, traditional *tangueros* dislike this song intensely. When it was premiered at Luna Park, the audience threw coins disapprovingly at the singer. Four days later, however, 200,000 records had been sold. Piazzolla and Ferrer collaborated on several other modern classics.¹³

In 1972-73, Piazzolla signed a contract with the Municipality of Buenos Aires to form a Nonet, which turned out to be one of his best groups, only rivaled by the first and second Quintets. In 1974, Piazzolla explored jazz fusion with Gerry Mulligan, recording *Reunión cumbre* (Summit Meeting), one of his most successful albums. "Gerry used to laugh in disbelief when the royalty checks came each year", his wife Franca recalls.¹⁴

During the 1970s, most instruments in popular music were highly amplified, and their sounds often modified electronically. The Fender-Rhodes electric piano was introduced, and the electric bass guitar replaced the traditional double bass. Piazzolla was influenced by jazz-rock, particularly by Chick Corea's

Return to Forever band, in which Corea played synthesizers and various electronic gadgets and pedals. Piazzolla created an Electronic Octet, which did not last long: the European audience preferred the acoustic sounds of his previous ensembles. In 1976, Piazzolla's Octet gave a concert sponsored by the Argentine Embassy at Carnegie Hall, but he continued to perform more in Europe and Latin America than in the United States.

In 1976, on the day of his 55th birthday, Piazzolla met Laura Escalada, and they remained together for the rest of his life. In 1978 he went back to his most successful format and established the Second Quintet: bandoneon, violin, double bass, electric guitar and piano. Piazzolla was ready to embark on countless international tours, in Europe, Japan and the Americas. He won international acclaim and started to make money for the first time in his life. In those days, he composed music for several European filmmakers: Jeanne Moreau, Alain Delon, Nadine Trintignant, Marco Bellocchio, and Helvio Soto. He collaborated with the Soviet dancers Vladimir Vassiliev and Ekaterina Maximova. Vassiliev had asked his permission to use *Adiós Nonino* in a film he wished to make of a Somerset Maugham story. Piazzolla also wrote chamber and symphonic music.

In the '80s, Astor and Laura bought a house in Punta del Este, Uruguay, where they could spend the summer. Piazzolla composed on the piano, and he reveled in the tranquil atmosphere of a resort that reminded him of the Mar del Plata of his youth. Piazzolla was intense as a musician, and just as intensely he enjoyed the outdoors life. He once had the chance to fish for a shark, and he found out that it answered a deep existential need: "All the rage I have inside –I take my revenge on a shark". He loved barbecues and intimate dinners with friends. Released from the pressure of hectic world tours, he bicycled, shopped at the supermarket, and enjoyed Laura's company. And yet a spectacular success was awaiting Piazzolla in his homeland: a concert at the Colón Opera House in June 11, 1983.

In 1984 and 1985 Piazzolla had an extraordinary collaboration with Milva, a great Italian singer who could convey the drama of his tangos. Milva remembers Piazzolla as "very serious, very professional", and someone who gave her a "musical richness that will remain with me all of my life".

In 1986, his Quintet performed at several jazz festivals: Ravenna, Nice, Pescara and Montreux. Piazzolla was now constantly rubbing shoulders with jazz musicians he admired, like Miles Davis, Lionel Hampton, Pat Metheny, Michel Petrucciani, and Jim Hall. The Quintet and Gary Burton leapt across the globe to Japan. At the Sapporo Jazz Festival, the highly talented guitarist Al Di Meola met Piazzolla. "Astor and I developed a relationship as friends and mutual admirers, one that I will always treasure", says Di Meola.¹⁵

In 1987, Piazzolla and his Quintet performed before an audience of 4,000 people in Central Park. Reviews were eulogistic. Gil Evans later told Piazzolla that it was "one of the most incredible concerts of my life".¹⁶ A few days later Piazzolla was at Princeton University to record his *Bandoneon Concerto* with the St. Luke's Orchestra, conducted by his old friend Lalo Schifrin.

That same year, Piazzolla attended a concert of the Kronos Quartet, and went backstage to compliment the musicians. "I asked him if I could call him in a few days", recalls David Harrington, founder of Kronos. "I *did* call him a few days later. By then he had finished *Four for Tango*, and he said: 'shall I send it to you?'". The Kronos Quartet decided to include the composition on their next album, *Winter Was Hard*, recorded in November 1987.¹⁷

Piazzolla's health deteriorated, and he cancelled the Quintet. In 1988, he had quadruple bypass surgery, a practice performed by Dr. Fernández Aramburu. The operation took about three and a half hours, and three weeks later Piazzolla was given a clean bill of health.¹⁸

In 1989 he established a Sextet with two bandoneons, piano, double bass, guitar and cello. Piazzolla looked fatigued and got easily tired but, as always, he had plans. He was thinking of future tours and concerts. He also had to write a piece Mstislav Rostropovich had commissioned. When they met, Piazzolla asked him if he could add a bandoneon to the planned cello-piano-guitar-percussion line-up. "If you play it yourself, certainly", Rostropovich replied.¹⁹

Piazzolla and Laura were in Paris, getting ready to attend Sunday mass at Nôtre Dame, when Astor had a cerebral hemorrhage. It was August 5, 1990. Laura and his children, Daniel and Diana, agreed that Astor should return to Argentina. A twenty-three-month ordeal followed, until his death in Buenos Aires on July 4, 1992.

Piazzolla's international reputation has climbed during the years since his death. His music has been played and recorded by a wide variety of groups, including the Kronos Quartet, the Assad brothers, and the G-String Quartet. Piazzolla music has been recorded by jazz giants like Al Di Meola, Gary Burton and Phil Woods, and by classical artists like Rostropovich, Daniel Barenboim, Emanuel Ax, Yo-Yo Ma, Gidon Kremer and the cellists of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, among many others.

Although he never typed himself, he was a *polyclassiste*. For Piazzolla, the burning question was: "Do you or don't you like my music?". He never compromised his standards to cater to commercial interests. "My dream", he once said, "is to introduce my music and my country's music all over the world".²⁰

ENDNOTES

1. Azzi, M. S. and S. Collier (2002). *Astor Piazzolla: su vida y su música*. Buenos Aires: Editorial El Ateneo, p. 8.
2. Astor Piazzolla in *Boston Globe*, August 23, 1987.
3. Azzi and Collier, *Op. cit.*, p. 6.
4. Kennedy, M., ed. (1998). *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 61.
5. Azzi and Collier, *Op. cit.*, p. 41-42.
6. Speratti, A. (1969). *Con Piazzolla*. Buenos Aires: Ed. Galerna, pp. 72-73. *Convicción* (Buenos Aires Newspaper), 14 de noviembre de 1979. Interview with Horacio Ferrer, 1988.
7. Azzi and Collier, *Op. cit.*, p. 55.
8. Kennedy, *Op. cit.*, p. 853.
9. Azzi and Collier, *Op. cit.*, pp. 65-66.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

13. See Kernfeld, B., ed. (1995). *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
14. Azzi and Collier, *Op. cit.*, p. 172.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 245.
16. Steve Sacks (1994). Liner notes on *Astor Piazzolla: The Central Park Concert 1987*, Chesky Records JD 107.
17. Azzi and Collier, *Op. cit.*, p. 254.
18. *Ibid.*, 262.
19. *Clarín* (Buenos Aires Newspaper), July 20, 1994.
20. Astor Piazzolla. *Clarín*, December 1, 1974.

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