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ASTOR PIAZZOLLA biography

An extraordinary musician, composer, and bandleader, Astor Piazzolla, the creator of New Tango, was born on March 11, 1921, in Mar del Plata, a seaside city about 248 miles south of Buenos Aires. He was just four years old when the family emigrated to New York City where, but for a brief attempt to return to Argentina, they would live the next 12 years.

The Lower East Side of Manhattan was then a tough place populated by gangs of seemingly every stripe. Piazzolla, a small kid with a limp, the result of a congenital malformation of his right foot and several surgeries, grew up a never-back-down fighter with a hard left punch. That attitude would serve him well, later on, to fight back when some critics and traditionalists took offense to his innovations and attacked him --sometimes even physically. Musically, he grew up listening to the tango records his father Vicente, nicknamed "Nonino," played in the evenings after work. But young Astor also heard jazz in Harlem and was surrounded by the sounds of a diverse neighborhood, including Klezmer music, Italian Neapolitan songs — and Bach.

He learned to play bandoneon, the melancholy-sounding button squeezebox that embodies the sound of tango, by trial and error and a few lessons, and adapting the music of Bach, Schumann, and Mozart that he was learning with his piano teacher.

It's no surprise then that his tango had little to do with postcard clichés of a Buenos Aires he didn't know and that, in many cases, no longer existed. Instead, the cosmopolitan Piazzolla drew from various sources, most notably European classical music and jazz. His New Tango would feature elements such as soaring, operatic melodies, Bach-inspired fugues, urgent rhythms that evoked Bartók and Stravinsky, a jazz-style "walking" bass, and the sound of the electric guitar.

Piazzolla returned to Argentina with his family in 1937. He was just 16, and after a couple of years living, studying, and performing in Mar del Plata, he decided to try his luck in Buenos Aires. He quickly found work with a couple of second-tier orchestras, but he jumped in class in a matter of months, joining one of the best tango orchestras of the day, led by bandoneón player and composer Anibal Troilo. Still, the cabaret life, and playing and arranging tango for dancers proved deeply unsatisfying. He began studying with classical composer Alberto Ginastera (Piazzolla was his first student) and supplemented his work with the orchestra writing music for film and pieces in a classical style. In 1944, he left Troilo, briefly accompanied a singer, and organized his own orchestra — then he quit tango altogether.

Improbably, what brought Piazzolla's focus back to tango was the advice of a French teacher, the fabled Nadia Boulanger. She taught a long and diverse list of talents including Aaron Copland, Darius Milhaud, Philip Glass, John Eliot Gardiner, Quincy Jones, and Elliot Carter. Piazzolla studied with Boulanger in Paris in 1954, the rewards for winning a classical music competition in Buenos Aires. He might have wanted to be a classical musician in the European model then, but years later, he was fond of recalling that after Boulanger heard a few

bars of his tango “Triunfal,” she stopped him and told him: “Now, *this* is Piazzolla. Don’t ever leave him.”

Back in Buenos Aires in 1955, Piazzolla stirred the tango world with his writing and his exceptional Octeto Buenos Aires, which featured some of the best musicians on the scene. Well-received critically, the Octeto couldn’t find work, however, so in 1958, retracing his father’s steps, Piazzolla took his family back to New York, hoping for better fortune. It did not work as he expected. Instead, he once called this time in New York “the worst three years of my life.” The unexpected news of the death of his beloved Nonino in October 1959 added a note of terrible sadness and put an abrupt ending to the ill-fated adventure. Composed in New York, “Adios Nonino,” Piazzolla’s moving tribute to his father, remains one of his most beloved pieces.

Back in Buenos Aires in 1960, Piazzolla organized what would become his signature instrument: a quintet. Comprising bandoneón, violin, electric guitar, piano, and double bass, the quintet was not a common tango group. Instead, it suggested a combination, part chamber group, part jazz combo. The quintet would remain together, with some personnel changes along the way, until 1970.

It was a defining period musically for Piazzolla, creating lasting works and setting the tenets of his New Tango. But in 1971, frustrated with the critical and commercial response, he dispersed the group. Piazzolla then zigzagged artistically, working with classical forms and on New Tango projects, including a brilliant but short-lived experience with Conjunto 9, a nonet. In 1973, he moved to Rome, where he wrote new music for his ensembles (featuring Italian musicians) and film, finding the recognition and commercial success that eluded him back home. But this period proved artistically rewarding as well. He created lasting works including “Libertango,” which became an international hit; the “Suite Troileana,” a moving tribute to Anibal Troilo, who died in May 1975; “Oblivion,” a piece from his soundtrack for Marco Bellochio’s film *Enrico IV*, and *Summit*, a recording with jazz master Gerry Mulligan.

In 1978, after briefly revisiting the idea of an octet, updated with synthesizers, electric bass, and drums, Piazzolla formed a new quintet. He would perform and record with The New Tango Quintet for the next decade.

In the 1980s, working again in both New Tango and classical formats, Piazzolla achieved a broader international recognition. Concerned by health issues, Piazzolla disbanded the quintet in 1988. Yet feeling energized after quadruple bypass surgery, he formed a new ensemble, a sextet, which featured a second bandoneon and cello replacing the violin. It lasted only a year. Dissatisfied with the sound of the group and tired of touring, Piazzolla dissolved the sextet to focus on performing as a guest soloist with orchestras.

His last appearance was on July 3, 1990, in Greece.

On August 5, 1990, back in Paris with his wife Laura, he suffered a brain hemorrhage.

Taken back to Buenos Aires, he lingered for nearly two years, dying on July 4, 1992. He was 71 years old.

Years earlier, in Buenos Aires, a young Astor Piazzolla, a kid who studied “serious” music by day and played tangos at the cabaret at night, aspired to be a classical composer in the traditional European model. It turns out that it wasn’t necessary.

His New Tango took him to the temples of classical music and many of the world’s great stages.

Being Astor Piazzolla was enough.

- Fernando González

Fernando González is an arts writer and editor. He was a music critic for The Boston Globe, The Miami Herald, and The Washington Post, and managing editor of JAZZIZ Magazine. Gonzalez translated and annotated *Astor Piazzolla, A Memoir* as told to Natalio Gorín (Amadeus Press, 2001), and wrote liner notes for four of Piazzolla's albums.