

“Tango doesn't exist,” declared Astor Piazzolla during one of his last interviews, given in 1989 in Chile. “It existed many years ago, until 1955, when Buenos Aires was a city that dressed tango, walked tango, breathed the perfume of tango in the air. The tango of today is a boring, nostalgic imitation of that era.”

One sign of a genuine innovator is that there's a clear before and after when it comes to assessing their influence. In this respect, Piazzolla was a musical messiah. Adding elements of the classical fugue, counterpoint, dissonance, jazz syncopation and baroque *passacaglia* and performing and presenting tango with the seriousness and commitment of a concert pianist, he revolutionised the urban musical vernacular of his native Argentina. The sound he created is so distinctive that it has its own adjective: ‘*piazzoleano*’.

Piazzolla was a magisterial composer, an

extraordinary *bandoneón* player – he always played standing up – and a bossy but brilliant bandleader. But he was also a consummate professional and totally open-minded; in this respect he had more in common with Handel or Mozart than with his tango-playing contemporaries.

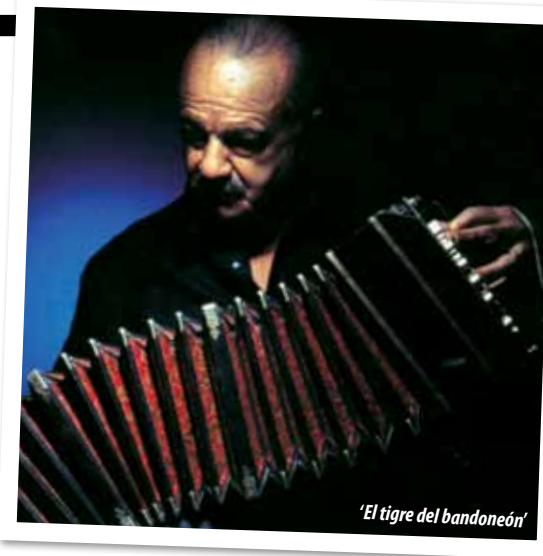
From very early on, Piazzolla was destined to be a *tanguero*. Born in the coastal city of Mar del Plata in 1921, his family moved to New York when he was just four. Growing up on the Lower East Side, he heard big band, jazz and classical music on the radio but his dad, Italian-born but nostalgic for Argentina, bought his son a bandoneón – the button accordion of German origin that's the quintessential tango instrument.

When Piazzolla was 13, Carlos Gardél, already a legend, arrived in Manhattan to make a film. The young bandoneón prodigy was too young to join Gardél and his band but got a bit part as a paper-boy in the film *El Día que me Quieras*.

When he was 16, Piazzolla returned to

Argentina. Tango was in its golden age, and the young musician got to play with several leading orchestras, including the one fronted by Aníbal Troilo. By 1946, Piazzolla had his own band but he was a perfectionist, and took classes with Argentinian composer Alberto Ginastera. Some early compositions such as ‘*Inspiración*’, ‘*Lo Que Vendrá*’ and ‘*Taconeando*’ show an instinct for experimentation. In 1954-1955 Piazzolla won a grant to go to Paris and study with composition teacher Nadia Boulanger, who told him to stick to tango, his natural means of expression. He did exactly that, and soon his inner creative demon was working full tilt.

During the 60s and 70s, Piazzolla composed several pieces of music that have become classics, among them ‘*Adiós Nonino*’, his affecting tribute to his late father, written in 1959. With 1961's ‘*Tres Minutos con la Realidad*’, Piazzolla declared his intention to make tango modern, metropolitan, intellectual and Bartókian in its intensity. *Nuevo* tango was born. Soon after



his music is part of popular culture. Homages paid by stellar classical musicians such as Yo-Yo Ma and Daniel Barenboim, as well as tango-philosophes like Richard Galliano and countless young orchestras in Buenos Aires, Tokyo, London and Helsinki keep winning new audiences for Piazzolla's music.

Where other tango greats such as bandleader Julio de Caro, pianist Osvaldo Pugliese and Troilo only nudged tango towards modernity, Piazzolla

came the sophisticated first movements of his *Porteña Seasons* and the *Angel* sequence – both would become integral to Piazzolla's touring repertoire.

During this formative period, not everyone approved of Piazzolla's radical arrangements or his technical showiness. Conservative critics and musicians in Buenos Aires' tango establishment regarded his style as just too experimental to be ‘proper’ tango. There were verbal attacks on the radio and, rumour has it, physical threats to the rising star.

Even as he polished standards, Piazzolla was always playing with form – jazz improv, electric guitar, classical arrangements – and formations, moving through many quintets, at least two octets, a nonet and a sextet. He spent time in New York and Italy, imbibing jazz, jazz-fusion, blues, rock and pop.

Always keen to collaborate with non-tango artists, Piazzolla recorded memorable albums with saxophonist Gerry Mulligan and vibraphone virtuoso Gary Burton. His work with tango's finest poet, Horacio Ferrer, produced some of the greatest songs in the genre, including the surreal ‘*Balada Para un Loco*’ – which must have sounded as leftfield as Pink Floyd when it was released in 1969 – and the beautiful ‘*Yo Soy María*’ motif-song from the brilliant mini-opera *María de Buenos Aires*. He also wrote 40-odd film scores – outstanding among these are the soundtracks for Pino Solana's *Sur* and Marco Bellocchio's *Enrico IV* (which contains the popular ‘*Oblivion*’).

Piazzolla won international fame with his last *Quinteto Nuevo* during the 80s, travelling to Europe, the US and Japan. Two recordings from this decade, *Zero Hour* and *La Camorra* produced by Kip Hanrahan for the Nonesuch label, were among the best of his career.

He died in 1992 but his influence is widespread and enduring. From Grace Jones' adaptation of ‘*Libertango*’ for 1981's ‘*I've Seen That Face Before*’ to numerous electronic tango versions of ‘*Vuelvo al Sur*’ to the latest Volvo advert (‘*Libertango*’ again),

music and, in a sense, stole it from the dancehall and from Buenos Aires. As a global superstar of the genre, only Gardél comes close, but even he is something of a special interest these days.

In classical and jazz circles, Piazzolla was always a genius on the fringes. In the world of tango, he was the *troesma* (maestro in Buenos Aires backslang) and ‘*el tigre del bandoneón*’. These days all serious tango musicians have to include him in their repertoire to get gigs. Then, if they hope to be original, they have to find something else to offer that doesn't sound like watered-

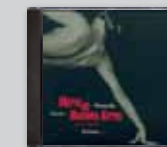
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down Piazzolla. It's not easy. Listen to veterans such as Rodolfo Mederos and Pablo Ziegler, or young orchestras like La Camorra. Piazzolla's spirit is there – whether named in the credits or in a certain astringency in the timbre, or a giddy pluck of the violin strings or in a sudden moment of fugal filigree.

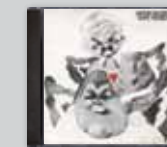
If he'd been born in the US, Piazzolla would have been a contemporary – and rival – of Leonard Bernstein. But, as he was born in the ‘*culo del mundo*’ – arsehole of the world, as Argentinians lovingly call their country – his status remains that of a rebel from the margins. His legacy might be better off for that.

Piazzolla's epitaph on tango, as declared in Chile, was ironic. When asked about his own art, Piazzolla was equally self-assured, stating: ‘*Mi tango sí es de hoy*’ (My Tango is of Today, For Sure). He was right, of course, and, for the moment, it's also the tango of tomorrow – because no one has even come close to his achievements this past half-century. Tango, if it is alive at all, is alive in a *piazzoleano* way. ●

BEST ALBUMS



Maria de Buenos Aires (Sony, 1968)
 Piazzolla and Horacio Ferrer collaborated on a range of projects, but this *operita* (little opera) is their most complete and most satisfying lyrical venture.



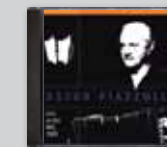
Suite Troileana (Trova, 1975)
 Written shortly after the death of Aníbal Troilo, this pensive album, recorded with the Conjunto Electronico, is recognised by Piazzolla aficionados as a landmark in the evolution of nuevo tango. A stand-out track is the haunting ‘*Soledad*’, composed for the Jeanne Moreau film *Lumière*.



Zero Hour (Nonesuch, 1986)
 The best of Piazzolla's three late albums recorded for the American label with producer Kip Hanrahan. This one features sublime versions of ‘*Milonga del Angel*’ and ‘*Tanguedia III*’. It was a Classic Album in #16.



La Camorra: The Solitude of Passionate Provocation (Nonesuch, 1989)
 The less famous second album of the Kip Hanrahan sessions. Subtler than *Zero Hour*, it contains a stirring version of ‘*Soledad*’ and the three-song ‘*La Camorra*’ sequence.



Live at the BBC (Intuition, 1989)
 This fantastic live show featuring many of the classics was recorded at the Whiteladies Road studios in Bristol by Tony Stavac. It was to be Piazzolla's last gig with the New Tango Sextet. At the end of it, Piazzolla said: “Sometimes music can make what the diplomats never will – love between Britain and Argentina.”

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Blow Up (Dreyfus Jazz, 1996)
 The French accordion virtuoso is a passionate Piazzolla acolyte and this pared-down homage, in collaboration with fellow French sax and clarinet player Michel Portal, is a great introduction.



→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

ASTOR PIAZZOLLA

The Argentinian maestro changed the history of tango and is still guiding its destiny. Chris Moss assesses the legacy of a passionate musical master

PORTRAIT JOEL MEYEROWITZ

