

The tango connection: Buenos Aires – Paris – Buenos Aires

In 1907, the tango arrived in Paris, and from there spread to other European capitals and to New York City. In the aristocratic ballrooms, the tango was domesticated, leaving aside the *cortes y quebradas* (suggestive contortions followed by a pause). Upon its return to Buenos Aires, the upper class took up this new, “clean” and “decent” tango. Although the dance had been moving under its own power from slum to Buenos Aires’ centre in the early 1900 / 1910s, its conquering of Paris accelerated and amplified this shift. Buenos Aires’ upper crust, routinely validated its status through seeking Parisian influence. Argentina, the most European country in South America, apes the state it would most like to resemble, France, in focusing national identity on its capital. Endorsement from abroad, especially from Paris, would boost upper-class domestic appreciation of the tango time after time, for instance, in helping legitimize musicians, dancers and singers.

Charles Romuald Gardes, who was to be known as Carlos Gardel, the most famous and celebrated tango singer, was born in Toulouse, on 11 December 1890. He arrived in Buenos Aires with his mother, Doña Berta, on board of the ship *Dom Pedro*, on 9 March 1923. He grew up in Buenos Aires, became a singer, and greatly admired Enrico Caruso and Titta Ruffo. He created the tango song and traveled extensively, both in Argentina and abroad, including France (Paris and Nice). He starred in seven films (three in France and four in the United States of America). He died in a plane accident (24 June 1935, Medellín, Colombia).

Later on, foreign endorsement also fueled the revival based on staged dance that began with the 1983 Paris debut of the show *Tango Argentino*, a creation of Héctor Orezzaoli and Claudio Segovia.

Astor Piazzolla. Born in Mar del Plata in 1921, but taken by his parents to New York at age four, Piazzolla grew up on the tough streets of the city's Lower East Side. As a teenager he became passionately fond of both jazz and classical music, while also learning the *bandoneón*, the classic tango instrument. On his return to Argentina at age sixteen, he quickly found his place in the flourishing tango world, then at its peak in Argentina, joining the most legendary dance-band of the period, and in 1946 forming his own band. He studied with Alberto Ginastera—Argentina's most important nationalist composer—and tried for a while to establish himself as a classical composer. In 1954 he went to study with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. Boulanger was an outstandingly influential teacher of composition. The list of her pupils is long and includes many distinguished composers, especially North Americans (Copland, Harris, Thomson, Carter and Piston). She was a frequent visitor to the United States, teaching at Juilliard School. It was Boulanger who finally convinced Piazzolla to play the tango rather than classical music. “[Your] music is well written,” she told him, “but it lacks *feeling*.” It was a verdict Boulanger handed out to most of her pupils. For a while Piazzolla was disheartened, walking the streets and pouring out his woes to his friends. Boulanger soon forced him out of his malaise. She asked him what music he played in Argentina. Piazzolla reluctantly admitted it was the tango. “I love that music!” she exclaimed. “But you don't play the piano ... to perform tangos. What instrument *do* you play?” Once again Piazzolla could barely bring himself to tell her it was the *bandoneón*. Boulanger reassured him: she had heard the instrument in music by Kurt Weill (*Dreigroschenoper*), and Stravinsky himself appreciated its qualities. Finally, Boulanger persuaded Piazzolla to play one of his tangos on the piano. He chose “Triunfal.” At the eighth bar she stopped him, took him by his hands and told him firmly: “*This* is Piazzolla! Don't ever leave it!”

Piazzolla recorded his new tangos with an orchestra he drew largely from the Paris Opera; his pianist was Lalo Schifrin soon to be replaced by Martial Solal, later one of Europe's top jazz pianists. Boulanger told Piazzolla to develop his own modern tango style, which he did with an extraordinary sequence of works, played by his notable groups—the Octet (1955), first Quintet (1960) and Nonet (1971). While still in Paris, one of his compatriot friends took him to hear a jazz ensemble led by the great saxophonist Gerry Mulligan. He was impressed by the happiness on stage, and the wide margin for improvisation. He and Mulligan later recorded an album together, *Summit* (or *Reunión Cumbre*). He traveled to Paris extensively and then established himself there. He met and worked with Georges Moustaki, Guy Marchand, Jean Guidoni, Jeanne Moreau, Nadine Trintignant, Alain Delon, Richard Galliano among others. Over the course of his career Piazzolla wrote more than 3,000 different pieces and is recognized by the SACEM as belonging to its formal categories of unusually prolific composers. An agent of deep renewal in tango music, Piazzolla himself constantly evolved, his work reflecting Buenos Aires, the hustle and din of contemporary society, and the whole range of human emotions. Loved and vilified, he died in 1992.

Piazzolla is now regarded as one of the glories of Argentine culture. He always tried to combine his thrust to renew tango music with his own pleasure in experimenting, constantly crossing frontiers and exploring diverse musical cultures and genres. He was a living embodiment of both integration and crossover. That does not mean that he ever denied his Argentine roots. But he was also in a real sense a wanderer, always open to new influences. Without ever ceasing to be *tanguero*, he aimed to fashion something more universal. “Paint your village, and you paint the world”—Tolstoy’s phrase was one of Piazzolla’s favorites. He painted *his* big village with such consummate skill that musicians (and eventually

audiences) flocked to him on four continents. He did not live to see the scale of it, but the world has now discovered Astor Piazzolla—Argentine, *tanguero*, and above all, musician.

Christelle Abinasr is an accomplished classical pianist with a very personal approach to Piazzolla's music, delicate, energetic and powerful. She recreates Piazzolla's idioms, those he had learnt listening to the old tango guard, with great ability and insight. The slower songs emphasize melancholy through a lyrical voice. Other offer gritty rhythms and harsh pointed melodies, a whole range of emotional sounds, combining a rich texture. She performs in a way that respects tradition while adding her personal classical touch. It is inconceivable that there will ever be a last tango either in Paris or Buenos Aires.

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