

Tango & Ravel's Boléro

SCHERMERHORN SYMPHONY CENTER

LAURA TURNER CONCERT HALL

November 19, 2009, at 7 p.m.

November 20 & 21, 2009, at 8 p.m.

Nashville Symphony

Giancarlo Guerrero, *conductor*

Tianwa Yang, *violin*

Daniel Binelli, *bandoneón*

ASTOR PIAZZOLLA

Buenos Aires: Tres Movimientos Sinfónicos, Op. 15

Moderato

Lento, con anima

Presto marcato

Daniel Binelli, *bandoneón*

ASTOR PIAZZOLLA

Concierto para Bandoneón "Aconcagua"

Allegro marcato

Milonga (Moderato)

Presto

Daniel Binelli, *bandoneón*

INTERMISSION

ASTOR PIAZZOLLA

Orch. Leonid Desyatnikov

Las Cuatro Estaciones Porteñas [The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires]

Otoño Porteño (Più lento) [Autumn]

Invierno Porteño (Lento y dramático) [Winter]

Primavera Porteña (Allegro) [Spring]

Verano Porteño (Lento y melancólico) [Summer]

Tianwa Yang, *violin*

MAURICE RAVEL

Boléro

ASTOR PIAZZOLLA

Born on March 11, 1921, in Mar del Plata, Argentina; died on July 4, 1992, in Buenos Aires, Argentina

"If classic is what remains as a model and universal is what belongs to everyone for all time, Piazzolla's tango is universal and classic music." So proclaims Horacio Ferrer, the poet and tango authority who collaborated with the composer on some of his best-known works. Indeed, Astor Piazzolla's name has become synonymous with the signature dance of his native country, Argentina. Like Johann Strauss Jr. with regard to the waltz, Piazzolla transformed a popular idiom into sophisticated art music.

This program samples Piazzolla's orchestral music, which represents just one facet of a complex, enormously gifted and prolific composer, performer and cultural icon whose influence continues to be felt across musical genres. We hear pieces ranging from his more classically oriented youthful efforts to mature

masterworks in which he discovered a balance for his creative ambitions. As a chaser to this exploration of Piazzolla's world, the evening concludes with perhaps the most famous symphonic tour de force based on a Latin dance — the *Boléro* of Maurice Ravel.

The tango is notoriously resistant to simple definitions. It is, after all, much more than a dance based on a derivative of the *habanera* rhythm. The tango contains within its hypnotic pulse an amalgam of diverse influences out of Europe and Africa — the word itself is possibly African in origin. These influences were stirred together in the slums and brothels of Buenos Aires. Immigrant workers within that great port city in the late 19th century shaped the unmistakable rhythmic gestures, instrumentation and general attitude of the tango. It then crossed lines of class and milieu. But the tango has always been defined by paradox: It can be heard in the tension between a strict, tight rhythmic control and the sensuous freedom suggested by the melodic line. Melancholy is countered with menace, while genuine passion faces up to dissembling masquerade.

Tradition and innovation are another paradox inherent in the tango as Piazzolla came to experience it. The son of Italian immigrants to Argentina, he moved with his parents to New York City, where he had a streetwise upbringing in Little Italy. As a young boy, Piazzolla had little interest in the music from back home until, at the age of 8, his tango-loving father bought him a bandoneón, or button accordion, at a pawn shop. The young Piazzolla fed his growing interest in classical music while becoming a prodigy on the instrument. In 1936, while he was still a teenager, the family returned to Argentina, and before he was 20 Piazzolla was already playing in Buenos Aires' top-notch tango orchestra, led by Aníbal Troilo.

Piazzolla acquired practical experience from countless nights in smoky clubs, but he already had a hankering for innovation — which proved to be a problem during this golden age of the cabaret tango. Its aficionados tended to be ultra-traditionalists, resistant to any tinkering with the now familiar formulas of tango culture (an irony, considering how dramatically the tango had evolved in just a few decades).

Inevitably, Piazzolla stirred up resentment when he began experimenting with new tango hybrids. His approach was iconoclastic and gave birth to a revolutionary musical movement, dubbed *nuevo tango*, which borrowed elements from jazz and classical music (from the Baroque to contemporaries such as Stravinsky and Bartók). *Nuevo tango* had greater complexity in terms of rhythmic patterns, harmonic vocabulary and contrapuntal textures. Piazzolla also began exploring longer forms suggested by classical music, even including a tango opera, *María de Buenos Aires*. Moreover, he bypassed the sacrosanct instrumentation of the standard tango orchestra and added electric sounds to the acoustic mix. His favorite tango band setup was a quintet consisting of bandoneón, piano, violin, electric guitar and double bass.

Buenos Aires - Tres Movimientos Sinfónicos, Op. 15

Piazzolla composed his *Tres Movimientos Sinfónicos* in 1951. Fabien Sevitzyk conducted the premiere on August 16, 1953, in Buenos Aires.

The score calls for piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, campanelli [small bells], tambourine, bass drum, tam-tam, triangle, whip, snare drum, guiro, xylophone, 2 bandoneóns, piano/celesta, harp and strings.

estimated length: 25 minutes

Piazzolla said that Buenos Aires taught him the secrets of the tango. He learned these “in a cold room in a boarding house, in the cabarets in the 1940s, in the cafes with balconies and orchestras, in the people of

yesterday and today, in the sounds of the streets.” But in addition he singled out two great teachers from the classical world: Nadia Boulanger and Alberto Ginastera.

What he learned from Ginastera is particularly evident in the *Tres Movimientos Sinfónicos*. In 1941 Piazzolla began a period of five years of private study with Ginastera, who lived across town in Buenos Aires, on the recommendation of pianist Arthur Rubinstein. Ginastera, only five years older, would develop a reputation as one of Argentina’s leading 20th-century composers. At the time, he seemed withdrawn and always dressed in black, looking “like a Protestant minister,” Piazzolla recalled, but the young musician was grateful that he learned more than technique from this teacher. Ginastera was a humanist who emphasized exposure across the arts — painting, literature, theater and film. “In those days,” according to Piazzolla, “with the majority of my colleagues, I could only talk about soccer and gambling.”

This is when Piazzolla began writing his most overtly classical pieces — on a parallel track with his tango orchestra pieces. This classical period culminated in *Buenos Aires: Tres Movimientos Sinfónicos*, which the composer also referred to as his *Sinfonía Buenos Aires*. Piazzolla’s score won a contest administered by Fabien Sevitzky (a nephew of Serge Koussevitzky and conductor of the Indianapolis Symphony), which provided a scholarship to study in France. Sevitzky flew to Buenos Aires to conduct the piece in August 1953. The audience included a small but vocal group of opponents who shouted disapproval, which Sevitzky found encouraging. “I have never seen such fistfights at a premiere,” the composer recalls him saying, “but relax, this is all publicity.”

The three-movement symphonic triptych displays an impressive sense of confidence in wielding such a large ensemble. It begins with bold, brassy gestures that sound generic at first, but Piazzolla’s personality soon emerges in the tango rhythms and flourishes that become part of the fabric. His taste for surprising percussive effects also adds color. Although the musical argument is often episodic, fitfully changing topic, the imaginative interplay of textures bears out Piazzolla’s claim that Ginastera made orchestration “one of my strong points.”

The second movement makes wonderful use of soloistic writing to paint its doleful moods. Piazzolla has clearly picked up some lessons from the Russian classics, too: A delicious clarinet solo provides entrée to a tango-driven episode, which is then whipped into a frenzy of Tchaikovskian emotion. Another tempestuous climax features prolonged trills out of *The Rite of Spring*. The music returns to its sad, stepwise melody before Piazzolla concludes his symphonic vision of Buenos Aires with a Presto marcato of thrilling, fiery momentum. Here he is most successful at integrating the rhythmic elements that predominate in the work, bringing it to a close with a convincingly sustained climax.

Yet such all-out symphonism turned out to be a dead end for Piazzolla. His year of study with Nadia Boulanger in 1954 led to an epiphany. Boulanger, the legendary composition teacher who mentored generations of musicians, from Aaron Copland to Philip Glass, knew only of her new student’s classical ambitions. She judged the pieces he had shown her well constructed but somehow disguising his true spirit. Piazzolla assumed his *tanguero* background would be dismissed as trivial. Quite the contrary. He played one of his tangos, “Triunfal,” for her on the piano. “When I had finished,” the composer recalls, “she said, ‘Astor, this is beautiful. Here is the true Piazzolla — do not ever leave him.’ It was the great revelation of my musical life.”

Concierto para Bandoneón (“Aconcagua”)

The Concerto for Bandoneón, written on a commission from the Banco de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, dates from the end of 1979. Piazzolla performed the solo at the premiere in Buenos Aires, with an ad hoc orchestra conducted by Simon Blech.

In addition to bandoneón, Piazzolla's score calls for a small orchestra consisting of piano, harp, timpani, triangle, guiro, bass drum and strings.

estimated length: 22 minutes

Boulanger marked a turning point for Piazzolla. The validity of his creative engagement with the tango had been reaffirmed, and it became the basis for his subsequent classical efforts — rather than an element that had to be disguised by overstated classical rhetoric. The bandoneón represents Piazzolla as the protagonist in his own music, much as the piano did for Mozart or Beethoven. He cultivated a distinctive style of playing the instrument as a member of his famous quintet and other ensembles. In fact, even if he had never composed, he'd still be a tango legend on account of his interpretive powers, amply documented on recordings. (Piazzolla defied tradition by performing while standing, with one leg raised on a chair.)

A member of the concertina family, the bandoneón betrays yet another of the tango's paradoxes. It was invented in Germany in the first half of the 19th century as a humble squeezebox, a makeshift organ used for worship, but it eventually found its way to the Buenos Aires docks and brothels as part of the emerging tango culture. The bandoneón was more than a musical instrument for Piazzolla, who compared it to his psychoanalyst: "I start playing and I blurt everything out." He composed the Bandoneón Concerto during one of the most creatively exhilarating periods of his life. As with the "Moonlight" Sonata, the nickname "Aconcagua" is an invention by a party other than the composer — in this case, Piazzolla's publisher, Aldo Pagani, who posthumously tacked the name on; it refers to the highest Andean peak. Piazzolla frequently played and recorded the piece, which embodies many of his characteristic devices.

The score omits woodwinds and brass, creating an ideal balance for the soloist. The first movement begins with bold determination — a more mature refinement of the similar procedure launching the *Tres Movimientos Sinfónicos*. The ensemble writing is dramatic and neatly articulated. Piazzolla also makes space for intimate dalliances between the soloist and orchestra, and for elaborate cadenzas in the center, before the opening material returns.

The central movement reveals Piazzolla — as composer and performer — at his most intimate, beginning with an extensive, soulful solo on the bandoneón emphasizing the lyrical intensity of which the tango is capable. The movement unfolds as introspective night music, with harp, solo violin and piano adding evocative touches. The finale begins as a bracing, breathless rondo but takes a surprise turn midway through. Suddenly, underscored by the guiro, the bandoneón begins to bawl a self-pitying monologue and then resolves into a stoic motif, convincing the ensemble to join in.

Las Cuatro Estaciones Porteñas (The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires)

Piazzolla composed each of *Las Cuatro Estaciones Porteñas* separately, beginning with *Summer* in 1965 and concluding with *Winter* in 1970.

This piece has appeared in countless arrangements by Piazzolla and others. In 1999 Leonid Desyatnikov made the arrangement we hear, in consultation with Gidon Kremer, for solo violin and string orchestra.

Estimated length: 25 minutes

It's not surprising that the linear counterpoint of Baroque music left its imprint on Piazzolla's tango aesthetic. The jazz masters admired by Piazzolla were also influenced by aspects of the Baroque, and like his Baroque forebears, Piazzolla made multiple arrangements of the same piece. The first music he learned to play

on bandoneón was that of Bach, which he learned from a Hungarian pianist in his neighborhood who had studied with none other than Rachmaninoff.

Piazzolla wrote *Las Cuatro Estaciones de Buenos Aires* in separate installments in the late 1960s. Even after he put them together as a suite whose title referred to Vivaldi's famous set of four concertos (themselves part of a larger cycle), that was just one of the many incarnations in which this music has appeared over the years. The composer started with *Summer* as a stand-alone piece, written overnight as theater music to accompany a play and configured for his five-piece tango quintet. The adjective *porteño* refers to "people of the port/harbor," i.e., the people of Buenos Aires. Unlike Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, each of which is a three-movement violin concerto accompanied by descriptive sonnets, Piazzolla's pieces are single tango movements that conjure states of mind.

However, the posthumous arrangement we hear does indulge in a few more Vivaldi references. Most importantly, Leonid Desyatnikov reconfigured the music for solo violin; he also added explicit quotes in *Summer* and *Winter*, playfully alluding to the hemispheric difference, so that Buenos Aires' Summer correctly corresponds to Vivaldi's Italian Winter, and vice versa. The seasons may also be played in the order preferred.

Autumn starts off with imitative percussion effects from the soloist and soon brings in the knife-edge glissando swoops that figure so prominently in Piazzolla's tango style. An emotionally florid cadenza from the cello reminds us of the reflective state of mind so often associated autumn. A passing tutti gives way to another cadenza, this time from the violin, which rewrites the cello solo with its own more capricious meditations. An angry-sounding reprise of the opening brings a quick end.

The emotional range Piazzolla uncovers in the tango is truly limitless. *Winter* begins in a somber mood. The violin's cadenza here seeks to heat the music up with passion, which leads to an amorous duet with solo cello. Eventually, a full-on tango breaks out — almost as a challenge, as music from Vivaldi's *Summer* storm briefly rages in the background. More Baroque references close out this odd tango. *Spring* kicks off with a wonderfully fugal texture (the very idea of a "tango fugue" is, in a nutshell, typical of Piazzolla's *nuevo tango*). The luxuriously lyrical middle episode mimics the function of the slow interior movement in a three-movement *concerto grosso*. Following this comes a reprise of the fugal opening spiced with *Psycho*-like dissonances. A similar shape is found in *Summer*, with delirious, languid excursions in the central episode. Concluding the cycle is a climax of intense frenzy — the tango as erotic duel.

MAURICE RAVEL

Born on March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, France; died on December 28, 1937, in Paris

Boléro

Ravel composed *Boléro* in 1928 as a ballet commission. The first performance was given on November 22, 1928, at the Paris Opera, with Walther Straram conducting. The Nashville Symphony's first performance was in April 1961; its most recent was in November 2001.

Ravel scores the work for a large orchestra consisting of piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes (2nd doubling oboe d'amore), English horn, 2 clarinets, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, piccolo trumpet, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, 2 saxophones, timpani, snare drums, cymbals, tam-tam, celesta, harp and strings.

estimated length: 14 minutes

Preoccupation with the dance is a recurrent and unifying thread among Ravel's compositions. *Boléro* dates from near the end of his career and, like several pieces that preceded it in his catalogue, began life as a ballet

before it went on to become even more familiar in the concert hall — not to mention film scores, commercials and other areas of popular culture.

Ravel was a master of transcription from piano to orchestra. Hoping to benefit from this gift, Ida Rubinstein — the star ballerina and beauty formerly with the Ballets Russes, who had struck out on her own — asked Ravel to orchestrate the Spanish-themed piano pieces Isaac Albéniz had written for his suite *Iberia*. He began the project, but when copyright complications got in the way, Ravel decided to write a new ballet from scratch. The simple scenario Rubinstein had in mind is reminiscent of *Carmen*: A female dancer in a Spanish tavern is cheered as she leaps onto a table and works the audience into a state of excitement with her performance.

The composer's mother was of Spanish heritage, and Ravel himself had used Spanish themes in several earlier works. For *Boléro* — as if to underline the stark simplicity of the ballet — he fixated on a basic rhythmic pattern, which consists of two measures in triple meter, at a moderate tempo. This is repeated by the snare drum throughout the piece (an effect known as *ostinato* because of its “obstinate” quality) and is one of the two repetitive elements around which Ravel structured his score. The other is the melody, which is laid out in two sections (both of them repeating) and unfolds sinuously, like a charmed snake. Throughout the piece, this melody is voiced by different instruments from Ravel's unusually large orchestra, starting with a solo flute and passing from solo instruments to instrumental choirs.

Two things about Ravel's concept are especially radical. (*Boléro* even led to speculations that he had gone mad, although it quickly achieved enormous popularity.) First is the monomania of the repetition, likened by some to a kind of pre-minimalism. Second is the complete *absence* of thematic development, which was a mainstay of the Western classical tradition. Yet the music, even while stuck in its C major groove, does seem to grow: Ravel structures the entire piece as a slowly building crescendo. Moreover, the constant shifting of tone colors against the rigid rhythmic tattoo generates a sense of tension that, at the climax, results in a sonic explosion.

— Thomas May is the program annotator for the Nashville Symphony and writes regularly about music and theater. His books include *Decoding Wagner* and *The John Adams Reader*

ARTIST BIOS

TIANWA YANG, *violin*

In concert and recital, Tianwa Yang is garnering unprecedented international reviews as she emerges as one of the most impressive young violinists today. “The 21-year-old Yang had announced herself as the most important new violinist to come on the scene in many a year,” the *Detroit News* said in October 2008, after her debut with the Detroit Symphony under the baton of Günther Herbig. In May 2009, her debut with the Seattle Symphony and Gerard Schwarz caused the *Seattle Times* to say, “This young woman could outplay the devil.”

Of Chinese descent, Yang started studying the violin at age 4, soon winning six out of the seven violin competitions she entered. At age 10 she was accepted by Professor Lin Yaoji at the Central Conservatory of Music, Beijing, and by the following year media, in Hong Kong described her as “a pride of China.” Following her performance at the 1999 Beijing Music Festival, Isaac Stern invited her to study with him in the United States. In 2000, at age 13, she recorded the 24 Caprices of Paganini, making her the youngest interpreter of this composition worldwide.

During the 2007/08 season, Yang gave her North American debut as part of the Virginia Arts Festival with the Virginia Symphony, in addition to her debut at the Berlin Philharmonic Hall, which was broadcast live by Deutschland Radio. She offered recitals in Switzerland and France, and enjoyed an extensive tour of Germany with Klassische Philharmonie Bonn.

Highlights in her upcoming seasons include debuts with the Eastern Music Festival in North America and with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra in the United

Kingdom. She will also undertake a second tour of Germany with the Klassische Philharmonie Bonn. Already a recording artist for Naxos, she will expand her discography with further albums for the label; in October, she will release the third in a seven-volume series devoted to the complete works of Sarasate for violin.

DANIEL BINELLI, *bandoneón*

Internationally renowned as a master of the bandoneón, Argentine Daniel Binelli tours extensively in concert and in recital. He showcases this unique and sensuous instrument in a wide range of compositions, many of which have roots in the tango of Binelli's native land, where he is known as an expert of the form.

A seasoned composer in his own right, Binelli worked on arrangements in the orchestra of Osvaldo Pugliese. He is also widely acclaimed as the foremost exponent and now torchbearer of the music of Astor Piazzolla. The torch was passed naturally after the two toured internationally with the New Tango Sextet before Piazzolla's death in 1992.

Orchestras with which Binelli has appeared as guest soloist include the Philadelphia Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, Atlanta Symphony, Montréal Symphony Orchestra, NHK Symphony Tokyo, Mexico City Philharmonic, National Symphony Orchestra of Argentina, Teatro Colón Orchestra of Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires Philharmonic, Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra of Caracas and Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

In the worlds of modern jazz and contemporary music, Binelli has played with Paquito d'Rivera and the Dizzy Gillespie Orchestra, Andreas Vollenweider (with whom he recorded *Kryptos*), Lalo Schifrin, Michael Brecker and Gary Burton. Binelli frequently collaborates with TangoMetropolis, a complete tango ensemble of which he is music director. He is also widely known for his contributions to film music.