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Estudios sobre la obra de Astor Piazzolla (review)

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OMAR GARCÍA BRUNELLI, compiler. 2008. *Estudios sobre la obra de Astor Piazzolla*. Buenos Aires: Gourmet Musical Ediciones, 300 pp.
ISBN 978-987-22664-2-4.

Given the complexity and breadth of Astor Piazzolla's compositional output, to say nothing of his ascendant popularity among classical musicians looking to diversify their repertoire, it is somewhat surprising that there has been, until recently, no book length study of Piazzolla from a musicological perspective. Piazzolla's life, like his work, spanned several continents and diverse musical and cultural milieus; he was a well-known target and source of polemics in his native Argentina and an outspoken and often playful interlocutor, all of which have led to a number of fascinating and entertaining biographies and works of cultural criticism (Collier and Azzi, Gorín, Kuri). But often in these books Piazzolla the man (and Piazzolla the myth) tend to eclipse Piazzolla's music, so this new volume of collected works is a particularly refreshing and unique contribution. Compiled by Omar García Brunelli, the book includes contributions by more than a dozen musicologists, as well as brief contributions by psychologist and essayist Carlos Kuri and journalist/historian Sergio Pujol. While some of these articles originally appeared in other publications and in other languages (including three from this journal, first published in English), the book is of particular use in presenting materials that were originally presented during two Piazzolla conferences (one in 2000 at CUNY, and the second in 2004, the *Primeras Jornadas de Investigación Astor Piazzolla* in Buenos Aires) that remain otherwise unpublished or difficult to obtain. Some articles were expanded or edited for this volume, and the Spanish translations are uniformly faithful and even elegant.

Piazzolla's compositional language poses a number of challenges that confound straightforward score analysis. Classical training in "academic" composition techniques with teachers including Alberto Ginastera and Nadia Boulanger shaped his approach, but so did his instrumental study and years of playing "traditional" tango alongside such masters of the genre as Aníbal Troilo. Furthermore, Piazzolla's tendency to write for groups that he performed in, as well as his reliance on musicians who were fluent improvisers in jazz, avant-garde styles, and traditional tango blur the lines between composition, improvisation, and performance, and published scores are often quite incomplete records of the complete piece of music as performed.

Carlos Kuri's article "Agonía del género y potencia del nombre" opens the book with the argument that one of the defining characteristics of Piazzolla's aesthetic was his continual search for "the other" in tango, and the "friction" between genres within one language. Piazzolla fashioned himself the creator of a new genre, "Tango nuevo," that adapted the idiom of traditional tango to the techniques of contemporary academic composition and

the concert stage. Several of the articles in this book attempt to address, with some analytical rigor, the question of just how much tango there is in tango nuevo. Gabriela Mauriño's "Raíces tangueras de la obra de Piazzolla" outlines antecedents for several aspects of Piazzolla's compositional language in various figures in tango history, from violinist Julio de Caro's innovative use of extended percussive techniques on the violin, Osvaldo Pugliese's characteristic rhythmic figure the yumba, and the particular influences of important musicians to play in Piazzolla's own groups, including violinist Elvino Vardaro and bassist Kicho Díaz. Martín Kutnowski's article specifically addresses the aspect of rubato and phrase structure in Piazzolla's instrumental music, arguing for its relation with the characteristic phrasing of vocal rubato in tango, an innovation attributed to Carlos Gardel. Flautist and specialist in the history of the flute in tango, Alejandro Martino, examines Piazzolla's use of that instrument in his Nuevo Octeto, where he employed not only traditional idioms but also called for improvisation. When this improvisation came out too jazz-inflected for his liking, Piazzolla obscured the solo's presence in the recording mix; ultimately Martino argues that there is "no one better than Astor to know which things in his music are tango and which are not"¹ (96).

Another group of articles in the volume address issues of intertextuality in Piazzolla's oeuvre. Malena Kuss's "La poética referencial de Astor Piazzolla", examines Piazzolla's manipulation of pitch sets derived from different forms of the octatonic scale, finding intertextual relationships with the music of Stravinsky and Piazzolla's former mentor, Ginastera, although in this latter case she concludes that it "in no way suggests 'influence' between one and the other . . . but rather a convergence of procedures at a particular juncture" (71), which for this reader is a limited enough conclusion to call into question the utility of the method of analysis in question. Alan Atlas examines intertextual relationships between Piazzolla's own works, specifically between the iconic B theme to his "greatest hit," "Adiós Nonino" and several other passages that employ the same harmonic sequence and use of flatted-9th "blue notes." Atlas's approach is basically semiotic, examining the contexts in which this highly recognizable sequence appears, and concluding that it is for Piazzolla a musical emblem of the funereal. In my judgment, one of the strongest articles in the collection is Omar García Brunelli's analysis of the three "Camorra" pieces, some of Piazzolla's last. Through a careful motivic analysis, García Brunelli demonstrates how a single melodic motive, originally sung en masse by the audience at Woodstock, and adopted by rock audiences in Argentina, became the point of genesis for all three pieces. The paradox in all this is that stylistically, these pieces represent a return to some of the most canyengue—a less internationalized, older tango style—of Piazzolla's tango-influenced pieces, yet the source material for all of this tanguero maneuvering is a musical emblem of the international rock scene.

Piazzolla's "operita," *María de Buenos Aires*, a dense and semiotically complex work in its own right, has proven perhaps the composer's work that is most amenable to traditional musicological methods of score analysis. Several examples of this approach appear in this volume, including an analysis of harmony and form by Ulrich Kramer, a section of Sonia Alejandra Lopez's dissertation (originally in German) on the use of fugue techniques in *María*, and Bernardo Illari's multifarious hermeneutic reading of the work as operetta, as ritual, as "carnavalesque inversion," and as a "motor for and symbol of change."

Space does not permit a complete examination of all the articles in this volume, but I should also mention that a comprehensive bibliography by Leandro Donozo and a discography by Mitsumasa Saito will be of great utility to future researchers. Overall, I found the diversity of approaches and concerns to be a benefit rather than a distraction, a necessarily incomplete but broadly reaching important step in filling a lacuna in musical analysis of Piazzolla's oeuvre. I do believe that the reader could have benefited from a more synthetic introduction to the volume, exploring common themes and concepts—in short, García Brunelli's own article was astute enough that I found myself wishing he had promoted himself from the more modest position of mere "compiler" to full-fledged editor—but regardless the book represents a mandatory addition to the library of Piazzolla scholars. Furthermore, it amply demonstrates why Piazzolla's music exemplifies many of the problems inherent in analyzing music and musicians who straddle, cross, and render meaningless boundaries of genre.

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Note

1. Translations are mine.

MARINA ALONSO BOLAÑOS. 2008. *La "invención" de la música indígena de México: Antropología e historia de las políticas culturales del siglo XX*. Buenos Aires: Editorial sb. 156 pp.

La "Invención" de la música indígena de México, Marina Alonso Bolaños's first book-length monograph, is based on her Master's thesis in Anthropology at the Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. It follows more than a decade of research and publication of articles and phonograms in the field of Mexican Indian music. Its authority is further bolstered by the author's close association with two of the principal Mexican cultural institutions the book treats, including the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia and the Comisión