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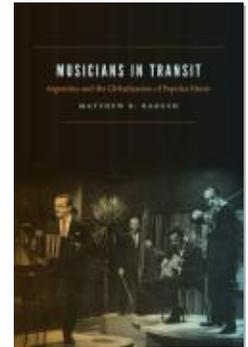
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COSMOPOLITAN TANGO

Astor Piazzolla at Home and Abroad

Lalo Schifrin was not the only Argentine musician to relocate to Paris in 1954, return to Buenos Aires shortly thereafter, and then move to New York City in 1958. The legendary tango composer and bandleader Astor Piazzolla followed precisely the same itinerary, making each move within months of the jazz wunderkind. Eleven years older than Schifrin, Piazzolla's motives for travel were similar: he too hoped to deepen his musical education in Paris and to discover new economic and artistic opportunities in New York. Like Schifrin, Piazzolla confronted a set of unanticipated musical and cultural expectations in the course of his travels, stereotypes that opened up certain opportunities even as they closed off others. In this sense, both musicians' international experiences reflected Argentina's position within the uneven structures of transnational musical culture as they existed in the 1950s. International travel allowed both Schifrin and Piazzolla to experiment and ultimately to escape the aesthetic limits imposed by those who policed the authenticity of their respective genres. Yet in other ways, Piazzolla's experience was very different. As a tango

musician, and especially as a practitioner of the bandoneón, a concertina that is the tango instrument par excellence, Piazzolla could not easily escape an identification with Argentina. As a result, he was not able to perform the role that Schiffrin quickly mastered: that of interpreter of diverse Latin American musical forms for North American audiences. More important, Piazzolla's association with tango meant that for Argentine audiences, national identity was always at stake in his performances. Schiffrin, like other Argentines who earned international acclaim for their achievements in genres that were understood as foreign, could be celebrated straightforwardly as a source of national pride.¹ By contrast, Piazzolla specialized in a musical form that was seen by many as a symbol of the nation. Engaging with foreign musical genres in order to transform the tango, he trod on dangerous ground.

Piazzolla's New Tango, as he named his musical innovations, reflected the intersection of two historical trajectories. On the one hand, many of the tensions and contradictions that characterized his music and the responses to it had been present within the tango world for decades. Since the 1920s, composers and bandleaders had looked for ways to "improve" the tango, to raise the music above its lowbrow associations while making it every bit as modern as jazz, its main competition on the dance floor. These efforts provoked controversy, as some tango fans embraced the innovations of New Guard composers while others held fast to more traditional styles. In a general sense, then, Piazzolla's music represented a new version of an old, vanguardist project within tango, though major shifts in the transnational musical world changed how this vanguardism sounded and what it meant. On the other hand, Piazzolla elaborated his musical project in the context of a major rupture in Argentine political history. In September 1955, just five months after Piazzolla's return from Paris, a military coup ended the regime of Juan Perón, provoking dramatic transformations in government policy, daily life, and public culture. Over the next few years, the New Tango would emerge as a potent symbol of a bourgeois project to build a modernized, cosmopolitan Argentina. To a certain extent, Piazzolla's successes and failures—both commercial and artistic—reflected the ups and downs experienced by that project and its defenders.

This chapter will explore the ways Piazzolla navigated the shifting contours of both the transnational soundscape and the national milieu. As a young man, Piazzolla had hoped to revolutionize the tango by importing compositional techniques from classical music. But it was the cool jazz of the 1950s that provided him with a model for how to make an old-fashioned dance music sound sophisticated, serious, and up to date. Despite this debt to jazz, his most successful efforts avoided stylistic fusion; unlike Barbieri's Latin jazz, Piazzolla's

New Tango of the 1960s was not made by welding together elements drawn from different genres. His music expressed a cosmopolitan nationalism that was attractive to the porteño middle class, but it did not conform to North American expectations and thus failed to capture a significant audience in the United States. By the early 1970s, new developments in jazz and rock made Piazzolla's music sound old-fashioned, and he began to lose his audience in Argentina. He disbanded his quintet, pursued various, more commercial projects, moved to Europe, and dabbled in jazz fusion. In the 1980s, though, the international context shifted again in Piazzolla's favor. The rise of the marketing category "world music" finally enabled him to attract North American listeners, which in turn reinforced a revival in his status at home. With the fall of the country's most brutal dictatorship in 1983, many Argentines sought to rediscover an older version of national identity, untainted by decades of violence. Piazzolla's New Tango, once heard as the epitome of progressive, avant-garde modernism, now induced a comforting nostalgia.

New York, Paris, and the Octeto Buenos Aires

Although internationally tango has often been seen as the quintessential music of Argentina, domestically it is more typically understood as the music of Buenos Aires. In the early decades of the twentieth century, porteño radio networks and record distributors facilitated its diffusion throughout the country, yet the genre never lost its symbolic association with the capital city. Astor Piazzolla, who was born in Mar del Plata, a seaside resort town located 250 miles south of Buenos Aires, would thus have been a bit of an outsider in the tango world. As it turned out, though, his birthplace hardly mattered; though born on the Argentine coast, Piazzolla grew up in New York City. Between the ages of four and sixteen, he lived with his family on Manhattan's Lower East Side. When he joined Aníbal Troilo's band in 1939 and thereby launched his tango career, he had only been back in Argentina for a bit more than two years and likely spoke better English than he did Spanish. Piazzolla's significant experience living outside of Argentina gave him a distinctive relationship to the tango. In particular, it helps account for his lack of orthodoxy, his aversion to any strict policing of the genre's borders. His connection to New York would also inform the way he was seen by tango musicians and critics, lending him prestige even as it marked him as suspiciously foreign.

Piazzolla's biographers have shed significant light on his formative years in New York. His father, a barber and a tango fan, gave him a bandoneón when he was eight and encouraged the boy to study the instrument. His musical train-

ing was idiosyncratic: he received some lessons in tango from an Argentine instructor, and a classically trained Hungarian pianist who lived next door taught him to play Bach on the bandoneón. Meanwhile, he and his friends snuck uptown to Harlem to hear jazz, and the young Piazzolla worked out Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" by himself. In 1933, he met Carlos Gardel, who had come to New York to make a series of radio programs. Gardel seems to have been impressed by Piazzolla's bandoneón playing but thought his style sounded foreign; in a now legendary anecdote, he told the boy that he played tango "like a Spaniard [*un gallego*]." Piazzolla's encounters with tango music and with Gardel himself reveal that his Argentine identity shaped his formative years even in faraway New York. Yet he was also able to pass as a North American, often claiming to be of Italian descent like many of his friends. When addressed in Spanish, the young Piazzolla would answer in English for fear of being labeled a Puerto Rican.² As Schifrin, Barbieri, and many other Argentine travelers later discovered, North Americans were not adept at distinguishing among Latin American nationalities.

In 1937, the family returned to Mar del Plata, and within two years, Piazzolla set off for Buenos Aires, intent on establishing himself as a professional tango musician. When he arrived in the capital, the tango world was divided between innovators and traditionalists. The composers and bandleaders of the New Guard, led since the late 1920s by Julio de Caro, called for an elevated, more sophisticated tango. In the opposite camp were traditionalist bandleaders like Francisco Canaro and their fans, who criticized De Caro and other innovators for adulterating the tango by mixing it with foreign elements. In the late 1930s, the advocates of innovation faced a new opponent: Juan D'Arienzo, the so-called King of the Beat, who performed a classic repertoire in a simple, rigid rhythm that reminded his many fans of an older, more masculine tango style. For the time being, D'Arienzo's formula, seen by all as a rejection of De Caro's efforts to elevate and modernize the tango, seemed to be winning: at the end of the 1930s, it was his band that filled the dance floors.³

At this point, the battle between innovators and traditionalists was understood to be fundamentally about rhythm. D'Arienzo's fans attacked the New Guard composers for having lost track of the tango's essential beat, ostensibly the source of its authenticity, while they focused on trying to improve its melodies and harmonies. Meanwhile, his critics lambasted him for what they heard as an overly aggressive, monomaniacal insistence on the beat. To the fans of the New Guard, rhythm was the most primitive aspect of music, since it appealed to the body rather than the mind. By sacrificing musical sophistication and emphasizing a simple dance beat, D'Arienzo was appealing to the most

plebeian and uneducated in the tango audience. When a young bandoneonist name Aníbal Troilo launched his own band in 1937, many hoped that he would rectify the D'Arienzo-inspired overemphasis on rhythm. As one fan put it on the eve of the new band's debut on Radio El Mundo, Troilo "will demonstrate that it is possible to make rhythm within strictly musical norms and without forgetting that no matter how danceable one makes the tango, it must have melody, which is its very essence."⁴ Troilo did not disappoint. More than any other bandleader of this period, he succeeded in reconciling sophistication and popular appeal, earning the approval of the followers of De Caro while leading one of the most sought after tango bands of the 1940s and beyond.⁵ Piazzolla, a fan of De Caro and other tango innovators, joined Troilo's band in December 1939.

Piazzolla began as one of five bandoneonists in Troilo's big band, but he was too ambitious, both musically and professionally, to be content with such a minor role. Moreover, from the beginning, he did not seem to fit in particularly well among the other musicians, a difficulty that was partly due to his New York background. He was known as "el Yoni" (Argentine Spanish for "Johnny") because of his accent, and when he played Gershwin on the bandoneón, his bandmates told him to "leave that stuff for the North Americans." But more important, his aspirations were different. From 1941 to 1945, even as he performed regularly in the Troilo band, Piazzolla studied music with Alberto Ginastera, a young Argentine composer of a nationalist bent, who introduced his student to the work of Stravinsky, Ravel, and Bartok. In 1943, Piazzolla began to write arrangements for the Troilo band, thereby making professional use of the skills he acquired in his studies with Ginastera. Troilo seems to have appreciated his work, but he also sought to reign him in by excising elements that he found too experimental or unlikely to please the fans who came to dance. Piazzolla soon tired of these constraints on his creativity. He left the group in 1944 and two years later launched his own tango band.⁶

Although Piazzolla's first band only lasted for three years, he remained a major presence as a composer and an arranger for Troilo's band and others. A 1947 review in the newspaper *Noticias Gráficas* reveals that Piazzolla had earned a reputation as the most adventurous, young innovator in the tango scene: "Astor Piazzolla has an unusual background. He never experienced the stimulating and inevitable Buenos Aires scene of kerosene street lamps, and organ grinders, and everything else. He grew up among the skyscrapers. It is his fate to reconcile opposites, as we can see, which explains how he can offer us the most stubborn tango hits of the old days with chords that seem almost Stravinskian."⁷ For this reviewer, Piazzolla's New York background accounted for his tendency to push the tango in a more sophisticated, modern, and cos-

mopolitan direction. But if some critics heard Stravinsky, Piazzolla later said that his musical interests at this time also included jazz, particularly Stan Kenton's "progressive" concert orchestra. Piazzolla never mentioned Kenton's use of Cuban percussion, the bongos that would later irritate Lalo Schifrin. Instead, he said that he wanted "to work similar harmonies but with a difference: in place of brass I had strings and bandoneons."⁸ As these comments suggest, jazz for Piazzolla was less a source of specific musical elements to be borrowed than a model of how to bring musical sophistication and innovation to bear on a popular dance music. Kenton had borrowed dissonant harmonies from modern classical music without thereby losing the essential rhythmic feel of jazz. Piazzolla began to imagine doing something similar with tango.

In the early 1950s, Piazzolla busied himself composing tangos, arranging for tango bands, and writing music for films, but at the same time he also began composing more ambitious symphonic works. With the encouragement of his teacher, Ginastera, he entered one of these in a competition sponsored by the Perón government and won. His submission, a three-movement piece entitled simply *Buenos Aires*, featured an orchestra with two bandoneons as well as a percussion instrument that Piazzolla devised, called a *lija* (Spanish for sandpaper), in order to produce the characteristic scratching sounds that tango violinists make by bowing below the bridge. In its incorporation of tango sonorities within a classical, European symphonic structure, the piece is broadly comparable to the many efforts of twentieth-century composers—from Gershwin and Copland to Bartok and Villa-Lobos—to adapt materials drawn from popular music. The gesture was not unprecedented within the tango world; Julio de Caro, himself, had created symphonic versions of tangos in the 1930s in an effort to ennoble and refine the genre.⁹ Using terms reminiscent of those that had been applied to De Caro's efforts, *La Prensa's* critic described Piazzolla's piece as "an important contribution to the elevation [*jerarquización*] of the tango," while another local reviewer compared the young composer to Gershwin.¹⁰ The recognition Piazzolla earned for this early effort at classical composition encouraged him to leave the tango behind. In 1954, he took the modest cash prize he won for *Buenos Aires* and moved to Paris in order to study with the legendary teacher Nadia Boulanger.

In many interviews, Piazzolla described experiencing two epiphanies in Paris. The first of these occurred in one of his meetings with his new teacher, Boulanger: upon hearing some of the tangos he had composed, she told him that the Argentine genre was his true calling. Boulanger's enthusiasm, he later claimed, convinced him that he could achieve his artistic ambitions without turning his back on the tango.¹¹ While this anecdote may have been more of

a literary flourish than an accurate memory, there is no doubt that Piazzolla's six-month stay in Europe caused him to reassess the tango. The Parisian context had enabled and encouraged Lalo Schifrin to experiment with Latin jazz. But unlike Schifrin, Piazzolla already specialized in a specific Latin American genre; for him, France encouraged a return to his roots. From the moment he arrived, Piazzolla was pleasantly surprised to discover that the tango was alive and well in the French capital and that some of the local bands were even playing "Prepárense," a tango he had composed in 1952. The French audience for the Argentine genre was big enough, in fact, that he secured a contract to record some sixteen new tangos with an orchestra made up primarily of musicians from the Paris Opera and including Schifrin on piano. Piazzolla's second epiphany involved cool jazz. He claimed that he had seen a performance by an octet led by baritone saxophonist Gerry Mulligan and that he had been so inspired by the interplay between the musicians and by their obvious sense of collective joy, that he immediately began planning his own octet. As Diego Fischerman and Abel Gilbert have shown, this story was certainly apocryphal. Mulligan did perform at the Salle Pleyel in Paris in 1954 but with a quartet not an octet and, more problematically, two months before Piazzolla arrived in France.¹² And yet, as I will describe below, the influence of Mulligan and of cool jazz more generally seems real enough. Piazzolla must have heard this music on records, records that he could just as easily have heard in Buenos Aires.¹³

In fact, Paris does not seem to have afforded Piazzolla anything that he could not have gotten at home. Not only had Buenos Aires already provided him the opportunity to compose and record tango, but the city also had a thriving jazz scene featuring musicians like Gato Barbieri who were hip to the latest styles from the United States. Moreover, Piazzolla already had an accomplished music teacher in Ginastera; his studies with Boulanger, which lasted for just four months, seem to have focused primarily on counterpoint, a technique he likely could have mastered without leaving Argentina. Nevertheless, Paris seemed to reshuffle the relationship between these elements and influences. First, for Piazzolla, as for many culturally aspiring Argentines before him, the French stamp of approval legitimized the tango as a worthwhile musical pursuit. Second, though Piazzolla had long been a jazz fan, the jazz and tango scenes in Buenos Aires were two entirely separate worlds, a situation that discouraged musical cross-pollination. Jazz and tango musicians simply did not play with each other in Buenos Aires, yet in Paris, Schifrin and Piazzolla recorded tango together. Schifrin later explained that he got the job because he was the only Argentine pianist in Paris, and it was reasonable to expect him to know how to play tango. But Piazzolla's account was different: he

explained that he invited Schifrin to record with him precisely because he was “a good jazz pianist, someone who knows what swing is.”¹⁴ In Paris, Piazzolla was far away from the critics and fans who inspected every tango innovation for deviance from some imagined standard of authenticity. He could hear the relevance of both jazz and classical music to tango in a way that he could not in Buenos Aires. He was now ready to invent something new.

Piazzolla’s return to Buenos Aires in April 1955 coincided with the last days of the Perón regime. In June, air force and navy jets bombed the Plaza de Mayo; by September, anti-Peronist generals succeeded in engineering a coup and inaugurating the so-called *Revolución Libertadora*. The fall of Perón was traumatic for the regime’s followers among the working class and the poor, who not only stood to lose the concrete benefits they had won during the previous decade but also felt their particular vision of the nation under attack.¹⁵ However, for many other Argentines, the experience truly was liberating. White-collar workers, intellectuals, and professionals had forged a middle-class identity in opposition to the plebeian masses whom the regime had empowered. For this middle class, the coup created the opportunity to “de-Peronize” society both by throwing Peronists out of positions of power and also by dislodging the regime’s populist and often anti-intellectual ideology from its hegemonic position. Perón had turned the nation’s universities and arts institutions over to Catholic traditionalists who tended to reject modernist influences. In the name of nationalism, the regime actively supported folk music and realist art, while rejecting abstraction and imported cultural forms. For many in the middle class, the fall of Peronism meant a more open environment in which the country could once again engage with cosmopolitan intellectual and artistic currents. In these heady days, intellectuals were deeply engaged in the project of imagining a new way to be in the world as Argentines, and music was one key site for this project.

Against this turbulent backdrop, Piazzolla launched the Octeto Buenos Aires, a new, avant-garde group with which he hoped to revolutionize the tango. Perhaps inspired by political events, Piazzolla published a manifesto in the form of a “Decalogue” in order to explain his project to the public. The document made the group’s vanguardist intentions clear. It promised to put artistic ambitions over commercial ones, to limit the use of singers, to incorporate new instruments, and to play music for listening rather than dancing. The goals of the octeto were

- (a) To raise the quality of the tango.
- (b) To convince those who have moved away from the tango, and its detractors, of the unquestionable

value of our music. (c) To attract those who exclusively love foreign music. (d) To conquer the mass public, a task we take for granted as arduous, but certain as soon as they have heard the themes played many times. (e) To take overseas, as an artistic embassy, this musical expression of the land where tango originated, to demonstrate its evolution and to further justify the appreciation in which it is held.¹⁶

The context of the *Revolución Libertadora* helps explain the Decalogue's distinctive version of nationalism. After a decade of Perón's assertive nativism, Argentina's new leaders hoped that they could modernize the nation by reopening it to the world. Piazzolla's desire to make music that would appeal both to foreign audiences and to Argentine listeners drawn to foreign genres resonated with the larger project of refashioning Argentine nationalism in a more modern and cosmopolitan vein.

At the same time, Piazzolla's project also reflected the widespread perception that tango was in commercial decline. The economic hard times of the early 1950s had taken a toll on the tango big bands, many of which could no longer afford to stay in business. Moreover, the transnational musical context had shifted. Tango had thrived as an Argentine alternative to big-band swing from the United States, but as that version of jazz came to seem old-fashioned, so did tango. To many observers, tango was incapable of competing with the new musical styles from abroad as well as with Argentine folk music, which had received a big boost from the Perón government. As the writer and tangophile Tulio Carella bemoaned, "Film and folklore have made musical tastes more eclectic."¹⁷ In this context, Piazzolla hoped to reconcile artistic vanguardism with popular appeal. Even as he promised to make a serious art for listening and to avoid pandering to the tastes of tango dancers, he expressed confidence that with time, he could win over a "mass public."

The music recorded by the Octeto Buenos Aires broke quite explicitly with the tango played by *orquestas típicas*. Unfamiliar harmonies and frequent changes in tempo made it clear that this was not music for dancing. To reinforce the point, Piazzolla wrote extensive liner notes that stressed the complexity and harmonic sophistication of each piece. The octeto's version of Piazzolla's own composition, "Lo que vendrá" (What Will Come) opens with a lengthy, dramatic melody on violin that sounds much more like Debussy than like tango.¹⁸ In general, the recordings are largely free of arrangements in which a group of instruments plays a simple harmony to accompany the melody. Instead, in many passages several instruments seem to solo at once, with distinct melody lines carefully interwoven. This rich counterpoint likely

reflects Piazzolla's studies in classical composition, but for contemporary listeners, jazz was a more obvious influence. As one reviewer put it, "Piazzolla approaches and skillfully solves the problem of varying tango rhythm by means of jazz-style syncopation."¹⁹ Whether or not Piazzolla's approach to rhythm was influenced by jazz, his choice of instrumentation certainly was. The octeto's most direct challenge to tango tradition was its incorporation of electric guitar. Acoustic guitars had long been associated with the genre, although they did not feature in the big dance bands. Nevertheless, the electric guitar was entirely new. Not only were its amplifier and power cord a visible break with tradition, but the instrument was also clearly associated with North American popular music. Moreover, Piazzolla chose Horacio Malvicino, an accomplished jazz musician and a member of the Bop Club, to play the instrument in the octeto. Most shockingly, at the end of most of the Octeto's pieces, Malvicino improvised freely. Here was a jazz guitarist bringing improvisation—the central aesthetic practice of jazz—to bear on a genre that had always stressed fidelity to a written score. In this context, it is not surprising that critics tended to focus on Piazzolla's borrowings from jazz.

In certain respects, the Octeto Buenos Aires was reminiscent of Julio De Caro's earlier efforts to "improve" the tango. Not only had De Caro invoked jazz as a model for how tango could be modernized, but his arguments often anticipated Piazzolla's. Piazzolla's claim that it was necessary "to elevate [*jerarquizar*]" the tango by stripping it of the "harmonic, melodic, rhythmic, and aesthetic monotony in which it was wrapped" could easily have come from a member of the New Guard. However, the octeto emerged at a very different moment. In the late 1930s, De Caro and his followers were struggling to save tango from the threat of commercial success; they believed that D'Arienzo had dumbed the genre down in order to appeal to the base instincts of a mass public. By contrast, in the mid-1950s, tango was rapidly losing its audience. Piazzolla saw his modernist project as a way of restoring the genre's commercial viability. In the immediate aftermath of Peronism, it made sense to align a sophisticated project of artistic renewal with a bid for mass appeal. As the *Revolución Libertadora* set about de-Peronizing the public sphere, burying any sign of the previous regime's populism, middle-class anti-Peronists hoped to reassert their role as cultural leaders. Piazzolla's Octeto Buenos Aires aptly symbolized that effort.

The octeto certainly struck a chord. In a history of tango written in 1957, Luis Villarroel celebrated the group as "an authentically revolutionary shock in the tango medium."²⁰ Another critic celebrated the emergence of a new "New Guard" capable of burying the tango of the past and reinventing the genre in

a way that would “respect the essences of the city, ‘the soul of the street,’ that imponderable something that the tango has, but know how to put it in music, know how to decipher it with the beauty and formal intensity that the new orchestral languages permit.” Although the article described other tango innovators, it singled out Piazzolla and the Octeto Buenos Aires as the movement’s leading edge. While the article emphasized Piazzolla’s modernity as well as his technical expertise, it also optimistically predicted that the octeto would win over a mass public. The author even quoted a taxi driver who claimed to be a big fan of “the kid” Piazzolla: “The tango has to be this way now.”²¹ Critics like this one hoped that Piazzolla, like Troilo before him, could reconcile tango tradition with modernity, sophistication with popularity.

Because it symbolized the larger project of the Argentine middle class, Piazzolla’s new version of tango figured prominently in the pages of Rogelio Frigerio’s news magazine *Qué*. Frigerio was an economist who had founded the magazine in the wake of the 1955 coup in order to advocate for “developmentalism,” an ideology that would gain enormous influence when Radical party politician Arturo Frondizi made it the centerpiece of his successful campaign for the presidency in 1958. Fearing that Argentina’s military leaders would neglect the nation’s industrial development as they sought to return power to the oligarchy, Frigerio called for aggressive protectionism and state planning in order to promote heavy industry, and he argued that a class alliance could be built in support of the social progress that would ensue. Frigerio’s insistence that Argentina be self-sufficient in oil production reflected a staunch nationalism, yet he also called for the encouragement of foreign investment and the incorporation of advanced technology from abroad. In certain respects, developmentalism was reminiscent of Peronism: Frigerio advocated similar economic policies, recruited Peronist intellectuals like Arturo Jauretche, and attacked the Argentine oligarchy for its lack of nationalism. Yet he hoped to detach industrial policy and nationalism from Perón’s brand of populism. In particular, he hoped that developmentalism’s emphasis on technological modernization would appeal to the middle class, a sector that he envisioned as central to the movement’s attempt at forging a class alliance.²²

The delicate balancing act implicit in developmentalism—in particular its attempt to harmonize Argentine nationalism with cosmopolitan modernization—was visible in *Qué*’s coverage of the Argentine music scene. In response to an article on the rock and roll of Elvis Presley and Bill Haley, one letter to the editor complained that the magazine was paying too much attention to “yankee” music and not enough to native genres like tango and folk. The magazine printed a response promising to dedicate the music section to

Argentine genres. And in fact, during the next months, *Qué* did run a series of articles on the past and present of tango.²³ In these pieces, the magazine's writers worked hard to strike a balance between respect for tradition and calls for innovation. A review of one Piazzolla concert argued that the innovative bandleader had taken experimentation too far. His tangos now sounded like dull "reports"; they risked "sterility."²⁴ By contrast, the magazine celebrated Aníbal Troilo for adopting "the new vanguardist canons" while "filtering out excessive audacity."²⁵ In other instances, *Qué* did welcome Piazzolla's effort to raise tango up to the level of serious art. When the Octeto Buenos Aires performed at the University of Buenos Aires Law School, followed by a modern dance piece set to Piazzolla's music, the magazine praised the composer for having taken the tango to such a prestigious space. Nevertheless, the reviewer hoped that Piazzolla would perform the same show in the plazas, barrios, and working-class suburbs of the city in order to assess whether this "artistic creation of popular roots" would actually appeal to the people.²⁶ *Qué* celebrated Piazzolla as a modernizer—the magazine described him as "el modernísimo Astor Piazzolla"²⁷—but his music only resonated with developmentalist goals insofar as it retained tango's national and popular authenticity.

Even if he did not always earn rave reviews, Piazzolla's efforts to modernize the tango by assimilating influences from jazz and classical music made him a figure of symbolic power in the post-Perón moment. When Julio de Caro convoked the leading tango musicians of the day to a meeting to discuss the future of the genre, *Qué* dedicated much of its coverage to Piazzolla, despite the fact that he had chosen not to attend: "Piazzolla's experience with European and North American publics makes him affirm that the tango has long since lost its appeal abroad because it is still played as it was twenty or thirty years ago. That interest will only be reawakened when someone confronts it with an attitude of renovation."²⁸ *Qué* here made the reaction of first-world listeners the standard by which to judge tango's modernization. And even though Piazzolla's international experience as a professional musician was actually quite limited at this point, the article implicitly acknowledged his expertise in foreign musical tastes. His project fit the aspirations of the moment, and that gave him a level of authority that was surprising in someone at such an early stage of his career.

The Quinteto Nuevo Tango and the "Contemporary Music of Buenos Aires"

In 1958, Piazzolla's financial and artistic ambitions impelled him to leave Buenos Aires once again and to return to New York. Although he had become a potent symbol of the effort to modernize Argentine national identity, he did

not get a lot of gigs. With porteños increasingly drawn to the novel sound of rock and roll, the avant-garde modernism of the Octeto Buenos Aires could not attract a large enough audience to sustain itself. On the eve of his departure, Piazzolla told a reporter that he intended to play tango in New York and hoped that North American audiences would respond with as much enthusiasm as the French had.²⁹ Piazzolla's two years in New York were shaped partly by the same forces that were then confronting Lalo Schifrin. Like Schifrin, Piazzolla struggled at first to find work, but he was seen as Latin, a perception that got him several jobs arranging for Latin dance bands, including those of Machito and Noro Morales. Unlike Schifrin, Piazzolla's specialization in tango also opened doors for him: he collaborated with Argentine choreographers on tango shows and even performed tango on a U.S. television program.

Piazzolla's most ambitious project during this New York period was the formation of a new quintet designed to play a tango-jazz hybrid. Piazzolla told an Argentine newspaper that he wanted to mix the two genres in order to secure a North American audience for "our music."³⁰ His jazz intentions were clear: he named his quintet "J-T," for jazz-tango (the name was a pun, since he intended for it to be pronounced *yeite*, a slang term for the special sound effects used by tango musicians). Moreover, the quintet included a vibraphone, an instrument with an unmistakable jazz provenance, and covered several jazz standards including "Lullaby of Birdland" and "Sophisticated Lady," not to mention an original composition named for the jazz pianist Oscar Peterson. Finally, the recordings of the Quinteto J-T feature improvisation on the rotating solo model associated with jazz. Even Piazzolla plays improvised solos on the bandoneón, something he would not repeat often in his career.

Yet the music of the New York quintet was more decisively shaped by the expectations produced by the North American idea of Latin music. At the very moment that Lalo Schifrin was putting his jazz aspirations on hold in order to join Xavier Cugat's Latin band, Piazzolla was responding to similar pressures. The quinteto recorded for Tico Records, which specialized in mambo and other Latin dance genres by such stars as Tito Puente, Tito Rodríguez, Machito, and Pete Terrace. For Tico, Piazzolla's jazz-tango hybrid fit within its larger menu of Latin offerings. The title of the one album Tico released, *Take Me Dancing: The Latin Rhythms of Astor Piazzolla [sic] & his Quintet*, made this categorization explicit and thereby undercut Piazzolla's earlier commitment to making music for listening. In place of the drum kit typical of jazz bands, the quintet played with a Latin percussion section composed of *güiro* and bongos and including Johnny Pacheco, the future salsa innovator. The inclusion of this rhythm section and the desire to attract Latin music fans necessitated several

modifications in Piazzolla's approach: in general, he avoided the rhythms and the techniques of articulation specific to tango, and he simplified the intricate counterpoint he had begun to explore in the Octeto Buenos Aires. In lengthy passages, particularly during improvised solos, piano, vibraphone, guitar, and bandoneón play simple accompaniment.

Piazzolla would later condemn his Quinteto J-T as a "capital sin," "a monstrosity," an aesthetic concession that he had made in order to feed his family.³¹ Yet his letters home from New York speak proudly of the music, and Pacheco remembered him enjoying the sessions.³² His subsequent disavowal of the project may reflect its commercial failure. Packaging tango as another form of Latin jazz failed to attract a mass audience. Illuminating in this regard was *Billboard's* review of the album, which described the bandoneón as "an unusual instrument" and concluded that "all the selections sound the same."³³ The Latin framing of the music provoked certain expectations in a North American audience primed by the mambo craze of the 1950s, expectations that Piazzolla frustrated by avoiding recognizable, Cuban beats. Piazzolla's music-for-listening aesthetic was more compatible with cool jazz, but fans of the latter would have been put off by the prominence of the mysterious bandoneón and the overtly Latin bongos and güiro. Piazzolla's commercial failure in New York contrasts with Schifrin's success. The Argentine pianist had experimented in Paris with a form of Latin jazz built on a blend of Cuban rhythm and jazz improvisation. When he moved to New York, he was prepared to fulfill North American expectations about what Latin music sounded like. That was not a move that Piazzolla was either able or willing to make.

By the time Piazzolla returned to Buenos Aires in 1960, he had begun to sour on his jazz-tango fusion: "It is an experience on which I do not wish to dwell. Its goal was to introduce the tango to the North American public tempering its rhythms and balancing them with jazz music. Even though it was well received, I believe that it is possible to impose the tango in its most authentic forms. . . . It is difficult to achieve acceptance [*imponerse*] without making concessions. But it is the only possible path."³⁴ For a composer and musician who had long conceived of himself as a revolutionary, the sudden concern with authenticity was strange, but it seemed to reveal Piazzolla's frustration with the constraints imposed by the North American category of Latin. Within a few months, his refusal to make "concessions" to North American tastes would evolve into a renewed focus on the Argentine market. Free from North American preconceptions about Latin jazz, Piazzolla could now innovate from within tango. His New York quintet had made a fusion music composed of elements drawn from distinct genres, elements that remained recognizable in the blend that

resulted (bongos from Latin music, improvisation from jazz, the bandoneón from tango). In Argentina, he could borrow from jazz as he saw fit without trying to make music that conformed to expectations derived from jazz. The result was a “New Tango”—tango that was infused with a jazz sensibility without including any elements that were easily recognizable as jazz.

Piazzolla’s new group, the Quinteto Nuevo Tango, was the vehicle for his most influential and innovative music. Composed of piano, electric guitar, upright bass, and violin in addition to the leader’s bandoneón, the group remained active until the early 1970s, although not without several personnel changes. Through the first half of the 1960s, the quintet recorded a series of albums for RCA and CBS and maintained an active schedule of performing in Buenos Aires clubs and touring the Argentine interior. Along the way, Piazzolla produced a large number of original compositions and elaborated a distinctive and instantly recognizable style that he would maintain largely intact for the rest of his career. Crucially, this new style was developed in Argentina for an Argentine audience; gone were the Latin percussion and jazz-style improvisation of his New York quintet. Nevertheless, the New Tango Piazzolla invented in the early 1960s bore the traces of his engagement with jazz and with classical music. In fact, without those transnational musical encounters, he could not have made the music he did.

Although Piazzolla’s new music provoked resistance from tango fans who felt that he was corrupting the genre, many of the most recognizable elements of his musical style were in fact drawn from tango traditions. Many of the new compositions featured a distinctive rhythmic pattern, often labeled 3+3+2, which accented the first, fourth, and seventh eighth note of a measure. By emphasizing this pattern, Piazzolla was explicitly breaking from the tango’s reliance on a straight, four-beat rhythm. Yet what became known as the “Piazzolla beat” had an unimpeachable tango provenance. Known in Cuban music as the *tresillo*, the pattern had formed the basis of various forms of Afro-Atlantic dance music at the turn of the twentieth century. In fact, one form of the *tresillo*, the Cuban dance known as the *habanera*, provided the rhythmic pulse for the earliest versions of Argentine tango.³⁵ Traditional tango bands still played the *habanera* rhythm when they performed the *milonga*, an up-tempo precursor to the tango that had enjoyed a renaissance in the 1930s and 1940s. In this sense, Piazzolla’s 3+3+2 represented his own personal take on Argentine tradition.³⁶ Likewise, New Tango pieces were filled with the percussive sound effects known as *yeites*, all of which were well-established features of tango music before Piazzolla. Many of these effects were produced by the violinist: the rhythmic scraping called *lija*, the *tambor* (snare drum) sound made by

plucking a string muted by the fingernails of the left hand, the loud slaps to the body of the instrument, the dramatic glissando known as the *látigo* (whip). The quintet also made extensive use of *arrastre*, or “dragging,” a technique of articulation central to tango performance, in which bass, piano, or bandoneón begin to play a heavily accented note before the beat, sliding up to it in pitch or volume or both.³⁷ Yet another feature of Piazzolla’s style that has been traced to tango tradition is his distinctive phrasing on the bandoneón, his willingness to depart rhythmically from the written score in order to add tension and emotion to his playing. The musicologist Martín Kutnowski has described both this performance style as well as certain rhythmic maneuvers typical of Piazzolla’s written scores as “instrumental rubato” and traced it to the techniques of classic tango singers like Carlos Gardel.³⁸ In this account, even Piazzolla’s way of phrasing a melody recalls tango tradition.

But if so much of Piazzolla’s style derived from tradition, what made his music seem so revolutionary? In part, this effect was caused by the extremes to which he pushed all these traditional elements. Many of the violin yeites were invented by Julio De Caro, and yet Piazzolla used them far more intensively, making them almost omnipresent in some of his songs. Similarly, De Caro had used the 3+3+2 pattern sporadically in his arrangements for his sextet of the late 1920s, but Piazzolla made it emblematic of his style. Piazzolla’s use of tango sound effects constituted an overt break with proper, European technique. Performing these sounds in the context of an explicitly avant-garde musical project enacted a tension between the popular and the erudite. Moreover, insofar as Piazzolla’s music was influenced by foreign musical traditions, the yeites, the *arrastre*, the rubato, and the 3+3+2 functioned as sonic signifiers of the tango. By breaking with the tango big band, incorporating the electric guitar, and most of all, making music for listening rather than dancing, Piazzolla produced a radical rupture in tango history. In this context, his heavy use of tango mannerisms was a way of anchoring his music to that tradition.

At the same time, many of Piazzolla’s innovations had no precedent in tango. Borrowing from Bach and no doubt drawing on his studies with Bou-langer, Piazzolla made much more extensive use of counterpoint than any previous tango composer. Interwoven melodic lines are present in almost all of his work, but this aspect of his style reaches its culmination in songs that contain fugue sections. He had dabbled with the idea of a tango fugue on “Counterpoint,” a song for his New York quintet, but his first fully worked out fugal work was “Calambre” (1961) on his first album with the Quinteto Nuevo Tango. In the opening section of this song, and in the many other fugues that he would go on to compose, Piazzolla uses an essentially baroque composi-

tional technique to create a richly polyphonic texture unlike anything else in tango. Likewise, Piazzolla's commitment to rhythmic complexity also goes beyond any precedent in tango. Long before Piazzolla, tango bassists played the *marcato*, a bass line of evenly accented quarter notes reminiscent of the "walking bass" in jazz. Piazzolla used the *marcato* extensively, but he adapted it in two ways. First, rather than having the bass "walk" through a set of chord changes, he often employed bass *ostinati*, short repeated melodies that form a backdrop against which the rest of the band play more complex patterns; "Buenos Aires hora cero" (1963) is a famous example. Second, Piazzolla often set the even, four-beat rhythm of the *marcato* against other rhythmic patterns. In the version of "Lo que vendrá" included on the quinteto's first album, the up-tempo third section features a strict *marcato* on the bass while the violin, bandoneón, and guitar play a melody in a strongly accented 3+3+2 pattern. Here are two traditional tango rhythms superimposed to create a dense, poly-rhythmic effect.³⁹

Though the New Tango has been described as a fusion music in which tango was mixed with elements drawn from jazz, I would argue against this interpretation.⁴⁰ After the failure of his New York quintet, Piazzolla had in fact turned his back on the project to construct a jazz-tango hybrid. Some scholars identify a walking bass in Piazzolla's New Tango compositions, but as I have noted, these bass lines were more likely modeled on the traditional *marcato*. His use of *ostinati* reminds some listeners of the riffs common to African American music, but it also has a clear precedent in the Baroque. More generally, Piazzolla's heavy use of syncopation might be attributed to jazz influence, but as a dance music with roots in the African diaspora, tango was heavily syncopated at its inception. In fact, Piazzolla's approach to rhythm bore no trace of the swing beat that has been characteristic of jazz since at least the 1930s. Likewise, the New Tango contained only limited space for improvisation, generally considered fundamental to jazz practice. Unlike the Quinteto J-T, the Quinteto Nuevo Tango never followed the rotating solos model of jazz. In short, with the single exception of the electric guitar, elements clearly derived from jazz are not identifiable in this music.

It is instructive to compare Piazzolla's music with bossa nova, the samba-jazz hybrid being developed at precisely the same time. Bossa nova emerged in large part out of the jazz scene in Rio de Janeiro; it mixed a samba beat with cool-jazz improvisation and even used the blues scale to construct many of its melodies and harmonies.⁴¹ In this sense, the bossa nova more closely approximated the international division of labor of Latin jazz than did the New Tango. Piazzolla himself claimed that his music was superior to bossa nova precisely

because it avoided the Brazilian genre's overreliance on jazz. He described bossa nova as "ten percent authentic in its rhythm, but harmonically speaking it is pure jazz," and he criticized Antônio Carlos Jobim for catering too much to North American tastes.⁴² Later, he directed a similar criticism at Gato Barbieri, who he claimed was following the dictates of "fashion" when he created his "mélange" of Latin American styles.⁴³ Piazzolla thus linked hybridity with cheap commercialism; he was no longer interested in fusion.

Nevertheless, Piazzolla's encounters with jazz were crucial to his musical vision. Recycling the apocryphal tale of hearing Gerry Mulligan's octet perform in Paris, Piazzolla told one North American journalist, "I thought of the changes jazz had undergone from New Orleans to the Benny Goodman of 1939 to Mulligan and the Modern Jazz Quartet. And I said to myself, 'Why isn't the tango ready for a similar evolution?'"⁴⁴ Piazzolla's choice of Mulligan and the MJQ was not incidental. These were prominent practitioners of cool jazz who specialized in an intricate interplay reminiscent of chamber music. What drew him to them was not their improvisational prowess but the sophistication of their arrangements. Piazzolla had learned the compositional technique of counterpoint from his classical studies. Yet it was the prestige of North American jazz that sanctioned his use of this technique within a popular musical form. Similarly, Piazzolla's use of the quintet format was itself likely modeled on the small groups typical of jazz since the advent of bebop in the 1940s. Within the quinteto, as in contemporary jazz groups, each musician functioned as a soloist, a unique, expressive voice rather than an anonymous source of accompaniment or support. The very idea of a small group of virtuosos making a sophisticated version of a popular genre was a jazz concept. By 1960, jazz was full of composer/bandleaders such as Thelonious Monk, Charles Mingus, Dave Brubeck, or the MJQ's John Lewis. Piazzolla's ability to imagine himself simultaneously occupying the roles of avant-garde composer, instrumentalist, and bandleader resulted from his exposure to jazz. In response to the frequent complaints from traditionalists that the music of the Quinteto Nuevo Tango was not tango, Piazzolla typically stressed his contemporaneity. The traditionalists, he argued "play and feel like they did 30 years ago. . . . They close themselves up within the myth of the tango . . . they do not participate in the general movement that is occurring around them." By contrast, his music had, in the words of one journalist, "a current, nervous, and cosmopolitan rhythm."⁴⁵ Piazzolla frequently claimed that his music was "contemporary music of Buenos Aires."⁴⁶ If his audible debt to tango enabled his music to represent Buenos Aires, it was his association with jazz that justified his claim to contemporaneity.

Piazzolla's frequent use of the English word *swing* further illuminates the way jazz shaped his musical approach. In interviews, he often used the term to describe his debt to old tango masters like De Caro, Alfredo Gobbi, and even Troilo, referring, for example, to "the swing of tango, something very difficult to define."⁴⁷ For Piazzolla, swing was linked not just to the tango of the past, but specifically to its rhythmic aspects. He explained that he attempted to preserve the rhythmic "flavor" of De Caro's tango style because "the rhythmic [elements], the percussion, the accentuation . . . is the most important part of tango interpretation, that which gives it swing."⁴⁸ His account of his own musical development as a tango arranger in the 1940s linked swing to rhythm and to jazz: "I discovered that the melodic elements also had a rhythmic foundation. I began to enjoy the swing in tango. In those days I had started to enjoy jazz again."⁴⁹ Here, Piazzolla uses the term to explain how an appreciation for jazz made him focus on the rhythmic aspects of tango. However, as he often explained, "I wanted tango swing, not jazz swing."⁵⁰ In other words, Piazzolla invoked swing not to refer to the lilting jazz rhythm composed of uneven eighth notes, but rather to any rhythmic essence or groove; jazz and tango each had their own version. In fact, Horacio Malvicino remembered that on the limited occasions when Piazzolla would ask his musicians to improvise, he always insisted that they avoid jazz and play in a "tangoesque" way: "Let the image be Buenos Aires and not New York."⁵¹ Similarly, he often claimed that only Argentines could capture the essence of tango; the Italian musicians he worked with in the 1970s "impregnated my works with the smell of pizza" instead of the "aroma of *asado* [Argentine barbecue]."⁵² In an account of a 1986 rehearsal with Malvicino, Piazzolla interrupts the guitarist and tells him to replay a passage but this time, "Put a little more force in it, more swing . . . play something of your own, you're more Argentine [*criollo*] than *mate*."⁵³ Swing, then, indexes rhythm, roots, personal expression, the popular essence of tango, and even Argentine authenticity. The fact that Piazzolla tended to use not just an English word but a jazz term to describe those qualities, even when speaking in Spanish to an Argentine audience, suggests that jazz enabled him to think about tango in a certain way. In particular, jazz made it possible for him to envision a modernized, contemporary, sophisticated music that somehow remained true to the essence of tango.

Jazz also definitively shaped the reception of the New Tango. Most of the quinteto's gigs in the early 1960s took place in small, Buenos Aires nightclubs that had been envisioned as jazz performance spaces. Most famously, the group played frequently at Jamaica, where they alternated with numerous national and international jazz acts. Even at Tucumán 676, a nightclub built for Piazzolla's

group, the quinteto alternated with Argentine and North American jazz stars, including Gato Barbieri, Enrique Villegas, and Stan Getz. Similarly, when the group toured the Argentine interior in 1961, they were always booked with jazz bands.⁵⁴ The New Tango paired well with modern jazz not just because it was music for listening, but also because its pleasures were best appreciated in live performance. Even though Piazzolla had largely abandoned jazz-style improvisation, he encouraged his musicians to express themselves by phrasing the melodies as they saw fit, injecting swing into their performance, as he urged Malvicino to do. The guitarist Oscar López Ruiz, who replaced Malvicino in the band in 1961, recalled that Piazzolla would glare at him anytime he played notes that did not appear in the score. Yet López Ruiz also insisted that the group's live performances were far superior to their recordings.⁵⁵ The freedom that Piazzolla granted his band members, although extremely limited by jazz standards, lent the group's live performances an urgency and intensity that was reminiscent of jazz. Audience members, including very often visiting jazz musicians, would make a point of looking at the sheet music on the quinteto's music stands because they could not believe the music they heard was all written down.⁵⁶ Jazz even provided the members of the Quinteto Nuevo Tango with their sense of fashion. The band avoided the old fashioned suits worn by most tango musicians, opting instead for the skinny ties or dark sweaters favored by the cool jazz crowd.⁵⁷

Piazzolla's encounter with jazz enabled him to fashion a musical style that was at once steeped in tango tradition and engaged with cosmopolitan modernity, an achievement that gave him substantial symbolic power in the Argentina of the early 1960s. His brief sojourn in New York had amplified his stature at home. Upon his return, a local television station dedicated a program to him called, in English, "Welcome Mr. Piazzolla."⁵⁸ Over the next few years, as he formed the quinteto and invented the New Tango, the press continued to pay attention. At times, the media constructed Piazzolla as a typical member of the Argentine middle class confronting the wider world. One interview from 1962, described Piazzolla, his wife, two kids, and family dog as a picture of domestic bliss: "the Piazzolas' [sic] 'little house' of music is a home." Whereas Piazzolla was often depicted as a musical revolutionary or iconoclast, this article cast him in a much more conventional light, the patriarch and breadwinner of a happy family. Conservative gender politics made Piazzolla familiar and unthreatening to middle-class readers.⁵⁹ Most of the interview was given over to stories about the family's experiences abroad. Piazzolla's wife, Dedé, for example, described being shocked by the tendency of Parisian couples to kiss in public.⁶⁰ Articles like this one invited middle-class Argentines to see



FIGURE 3.1 • The Quinteto Nuevo Tango performs on Argentine television, 1962: Astor Piazzolla on bandoneón, Kicho Díaz on bass, Oscar López Ruiz on guitar, Antonio Agri on violin. Pianist Jaime Gosis is out of the frame on the left. Courtesy of the Archivo General de la Nación.

Piazzolla as one of them and to experience European modernity vicariously through him.

By the mid-1960s, Piazzolla represented an ideal version of masculine, middle-class identity. The journalist and newscaster Bernardo Neustadt, who urged the middle class to assume the political and cultural leadership of the nation, made Piazzolla a frequent guest of his program.⁶¹ On one occasion, Neustadt invited him along with several other figures from the worlds of politics, sports, and entertainment to identify Argentines of the past and present who deserved to be considered “idols.” All of the invited guests, as well as all of the celebrities nominated for idol status, were men. A still from the program published in the magazine *Gente* makes Piazzolla’s prominence clear: he sits at the center of the image, facing the camera with Neustadt and the other guests arrayed around him, and while all the other men wear suits and ties, Piazzolla sports his habitual dark sweater (see figure 3.2). His informal attire and assertive pose mark him as the quintessential modern, cosmopolitan, male



FIGURE 3.2 • Piazzolla (second from left) on Bernardo Neustadt's television show. *Gente* (January 27, 1966), 15.

intellectual. Piazzolla, who had been reticent to express his political views, was increasingly asked for his opinion of Peronism. He acknowledged that Perón had made some important advances in his first term and he disavowed the label *gorila*, reserved for the movement's most hostile opponents. However, he now publicly identified himself as anti-Peronist.⁶² Given his enthusiasm for engaging with foreign styles, his opposition to Peronism was no surprise, but it certainly reinforced his connection to the middle class. When, in the late 1960s, Neustadt made Piazzolla's "Fuga y misterio" the theme music to his influential television news program, the New Tango became almost a soundtrack for the modernizing project of the Argentine middle class.⁶³

This cosmopolitan, modernizing, middle-class worldview had its most prominent expression in *Primera Plana*, the magazine founded in 1962 by journalist Jacobo Timerman. In its coverage of politics as well as cultural and social trends, *Primera Plana* combined cosmopolitanism with nationalism, covering international fads and celebrating Argentine achievements with patriotic fervor. Modeled on *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Le Monde*, it addressed readers as a hip community, informed of the latest trends in Europe and the United States. In its emphasis on economic modernization, it was reminiscent of Rogelio Frigerio's developmentalist magazine, *Qué*. However, in the wake of President Frondizi's failure to build a class alliance and to reintegrate Peronist workers into the political system, *Primera Plana* was less committed to democracy. In both its advertising, which encouraged well-heeled businessmen to pursue conspicuous consumption, and its famous best-seller lists, which packaged the

literary tastes of its university-educated readers, the magazine was fundamentally elitist.⁶⁴

In the early 1960s, Piazzolla appeared several times in *Primera Plana*, culminating in May 1965, when the magazine put him on its cover, illustrating a lengthy article on the innovative musicians redefining jazz, tango, and Argentine folk music in Buenos Aires nightclubs, “modifying them, improving them, with resources that the creators of these genres never imagined.”⁶⁵ Piazzolla was a logical choice for the cover; his insistence on the contemporaneity of his music matched *Primera Plana*’s emphasis on hipness. As a version of tango in dialogue with modern jazz, Piazzolla’s music perfectly symbolized the magazine’s brand of cosmopolitan nationalism. Insisting on the need for renovation, he spoke for many Argentines who hoped their nation could contribute to the international cutting edge. As Piazzolla put it, “The country has a very poor image abroad. Argentina means steak. And nothing else. They confuse us with Brazil.”⁶⁶ After the cover story on Piazzolla, *Primera Plana*’s letters-to-the-editor section became a forum for the controversy surrounding the New Tango. While some readers disapproved of his assault on tango tradition, others wrote to express their admiration for this “revolutionary” whose music was “in accordance with the epoch.”⁶⁷ Piazzolla’s vanguardism was enticing to readers who wanted to see themselves as sophisticated and up-to-date.

The Argentine media defined Piazzolla’s music by means of two contrasts. In order to establish his avant-garde credentials, many articles paired him with his former employer, Aníbal Troilo. In interviews, Piazzolla described Troilo as the “essence of the tango,” but he also accused him of stagnating musically.⁶⁸ While the contrast with Troilo underscored the novelty and hipness of the New Tango, other articles aimed to draw out the music’s artistic ambitions. Toward this end, Piazzolla’s project was often contrasted with the music of the so-called Nueva Ola, a group of singers who appealed to a young audience with local versions of rock and roll and other foreign genres. For sophisticated music critics, the Nueva Ola represented cheap commercialism and the degradation of popular tastes. *Primera Plana* fumed that Piazzolla and the other musical innovators of Buenos Aires appealed only to a small minority and earned very little money while “records, radio and television have their own idols: Nueva Ola singers who pivot on the collective psychosis and belong less to the field of music than to that of publicity.”⁶⁹ Although some of Piazzolla’s fans attributed his lack of mass appeal entirely to the fact that he was not promoted the way the Nueva Ola stars were, *Primera Plana* acknowledged that unlike the latest hits, New Tango songs were difficult to whistle. In short, Piazzolla was everything these pop stars were not: their music was easy, his was difficult; theirs was

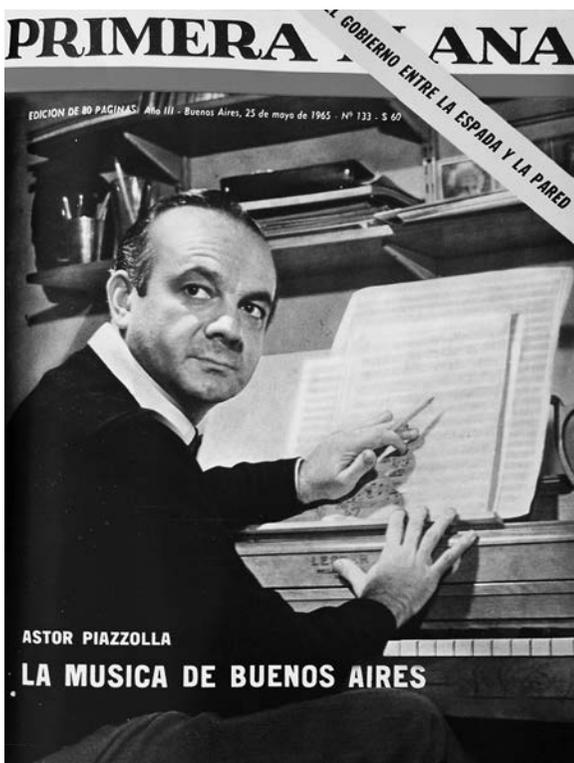


FIGURE 3.3 • Piazzolla on the cover of *Primera Plana*. *Primera Plana* (May 25, 1965).

commercial, his was artistic; theirs was purely imitative, his was cosmopolitan yet still authentically Argentine. These contrasts helped the magazine imbue a taste for Piazzolla with cultural capital.

As a sophisticated artistic practice in dialogue with the international vanguard, Piazzolla's project was of a piece with the artistic flowering occurring at the Instituto Di Tella in Buenos Aires. In the wake of the 1955 coup, the journalist, critic, and curator Jorge Romero Brest led a powerful movement to resurrect the abstract and modernist artistic styles disdained by the Perón regime and to establish Buenos Aires as a center of international art. During the 1960s, the symbolic center of this movement was the Instituto Di Tella, with its vast collection of modern art, its prize competitions, and its sponsorship of local avant-garde artists. Throughout the decade, porteños were increasingly able to attend cutting-edge exhibitions from abroad, even as local artists achieved a new level of recognition in Europe and the United States.⁷⁰ Up to a point, Piazzolla's music offered an apt soundtrack to these developments in the visual arts. As the detailed liner notes to the Quinteto Nuevo Tango's albums made clear, this was difficult, avant-garde music, inaccessible to the untrained

ear and every bit as challenging as modernist art. Yet by playing tango, Piazzolla rooted his art in local, popular culture in a way that most artists exhibited at the Instituto Di Tella did not. Tellingly, when Piazzolla compared himself to visual artists, he chose not the most challenging avant-gardists, but the figurative painter Juan Carlos Castagnino and the socially conscious New Realist, Antonio Berni, whom he labeled “authentic national creators.”⁷¹ Like Berni, whose work adorned the walls of Tucumán 676, Piazzolla aimed to produce an art that was in dialogue with contemporary trends even as it retained an insistent localism.

In addition to his works for the quintet, Piazzolla continued to compose art music for the concert hall. Nevertheless, he explained his music by analogy not to contemporary avant-garde composers but to jazz. Thus he justified his aversion to following the latest fads by citing the trumpeter Lee Morgan, and he argued that even popular musicians required musical training by insisting that “today, as occurs with jazz, it is absolutely necessary to know music, and well.”⁷² Jazz provided the musical model for his effort to reconcile cosmopolitanism and nationalism, contemporaneity and tradition, avant-gardism and artistic populism. While he never achieved a mass audience, he did sell a substantial number of records, earning some 754,000 pesos in royalties in 1965.⁷³ His music—or imitations of his music—provided the soundtrack to television programs and commercials. His records were symbols of hip sophistication, conveying prestige on their consumers. Piazzolla’s engagement with jazz made the New Tango an essential part of the musical landscape in Buenos Aires.

Yet while the Quinteto Nuevo Tango was establishing itself in Argentina, Piazzolla had far less success in achieving his old dream of winning over a North American audience. In May 1965, the government of President Arturo Illia sent the quintet along with tango singer Edmundo Rivero and folk group Los Huanca Hua to perform twice in Washington, DC, and once at Philharmonic Hall in New York’s Lincoln Center. Piazzolla’s inclusion alongside two traditionalist acts reveals the extent to which he had come to represent the modern, cosmopolitan version of Argentine national identity. In the United States, though, these performances made very little impression. Despite earning a positive review from Robert Shelton in the *New York Times*, Piazzolla would not return to New York for over a decade. Shelton’s review suggests that North American listeners may have found it difficult to make sense of the New Tango: “Sometimes the quintet sounded like a 1920-ish ballroom dance band, then like a Chico Hamilton–Fred Katz modern jazz combo, then it suggested a classical quintet turning from chamber music to bossa nova.”⁷⁴ Piazzolla’s music did not obey the international division of labor—Latin rhythm plus jazz

harmony, instrumentation, and improvisation—that had made bossa nova accessible to U.S. audiences. Nor did he embody a recognizable Latin persona in the way Gato Barbieri was soon to do. He was neither using Latin American aesthetics to ornament a North American genre, nor selling a recognizable form of cultural difference. As a result, Piazzolla would not develop a substantial following in the United States until the 1980s.

Rock, Jazz Fusion, World Music

For some observers, the late 1960s and early 1970s mark the beginning of a period of artistic stagnation for Piazzolla. Some have attributed this decline to a tendency to recycle old formulas, while others point to a series of personal struggles, including the breakup of his first marriage in 1966 and a heart attack in 1973. Without dismissing these factors, I would argue that the ups and downs of Piazzolla's career also reflect deep changes in transnational, popular music markets. The invention of the New Tango was made possible by the existence in the United States of a certain style of jazz: a sophisticated, urbane, carefully arranged, and cosmopolitan music played by small groups of virtuosos for a knowledgeable audience in smoky nightclubs. By the late 1960s, though, cool jazz had been largely eclipsed by the politicized emotionalism of free jazz as well as by fusion, which aimed to appeal to the much larger rock audience. Once cutting edge, Piazzolla's jazz allusions—musical, sartorial, and otherwise—seemed increasingly old-fashioned. At the same time, the advent of youth as a major marketing category reshaped popular music all over the world. In Argentina, this trend had been visible since the emergence of the Nueva Ola in the early 1960s. Piazzolla had thrived by offering an artistic alternative to those disillusioned with the crass commercialism of the new pop music. But in the wake of the Beatles, young Argentines began to find authentic forms of musical expression in new, domestic versions of rock music. As tastes shifted in response to transnational trends, Piazzolla found himself cut off from his audience. During the late 1960s, he disbanded the Quinteto Nuevo Tango and adopted a range of strategies aimed partly at attracting young Argentine fans. None of these were ultimately successful until new developments in transnational music markets created new opportunities.

Between 1968 and 1976, Piazzolla embarked on a series of new projects that pushed his music in several different directions. In partnership with the tango poet and lyricist Horacio Ferrer, Piazzolla wrote the “operita,” *María de Buenos Aires*. The work garnered only mixed reviews and failed to attract as big an audience as its creators had hoped, but Piazzolla and Ferrer followed it up

with the song “Balada para un loco.” Sung by Piazzolla’s new muse and love interest, Amelita Baltar, the song became, in the words of one newspaper, “the great porteño musical boom of 1969.”⁷⁵ Having come as close as he ever would to a hit song, Piazzolla leveraged his celebrity to return to his avant-garde roots. In 1971, he formed a nonet—the Conjunto 9—and secured a contract from the Buenos Aires municipal government to subsidize a regular series of concerts. If his work with Ferrer had been aimed at a broader audience, the new pieces he wrote for the nonet were every bit as challenging as those he had written in the early 1960s. Yet the new work failed to capture a significant audience, and the municipality declined to renew the contract. In 1974, Piazzolla signed a deal with the Italian agent Aldo Pagani and moved to Rome. Based in Europe during the next few years, he was extremely productive, appearing frequently on television and in concert, writing music for films, as well as composing and recording more broadly accessible versions of New Tango.

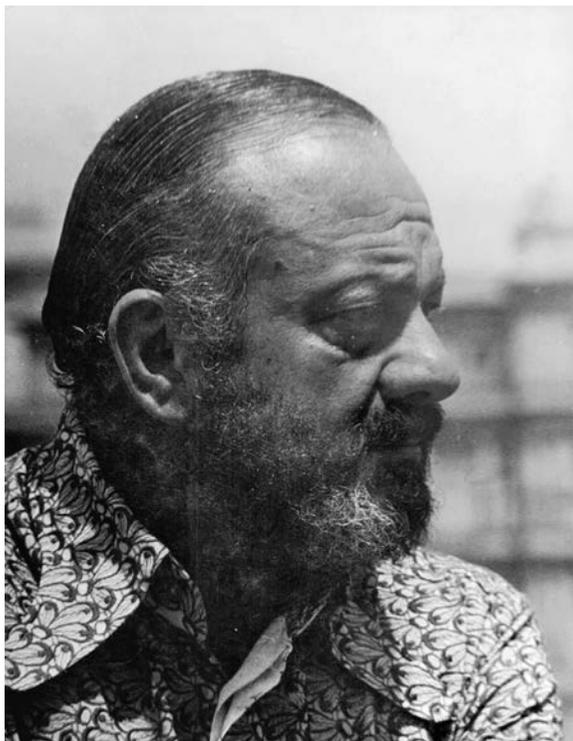
To a significant extent, these diverse musical projects can all be understood as a reaction to two developments that had disrupted Piazzolla’s relationship with his Argentine audience: the emergence of *rock nacional* and the deepening of social conflict and political repression. The New Tango had acquired cultural capital in the early 1960s by steering a path between the old-fashioned tango of Aníbal Troilo and the imitative pop of the Nueva Ola. In this way, it aptly expressed the modernizing, cosmopolitan nationalism of the porteño middle class. However, by the late 1960s, Piazzolla’s music sounded different. Reviewers of *María de Buenos Aires* found the music familiar: “Piazzolla . . . continues an aesthetic line that does not depart from his well-known trajectory, with the inevitable rhythmic treatment that characterizes many of his songs and with the nostalgic note that connects directly with the porteño tango tradition.”⁷⁶ The composer’s tendency to replicate his own musical gestures might account for this sense of familiarity, but for the iconoclastic, revolutionary New Tango to evoke nostalgia something must have shifted in the context of reception. Piazzolla’s music alluded unmistakably to classic tango and to cool jazz. For Argentine listeners in the late 1960s, who were increasingly immersed in rock music, these two genres were deeply out of style. At the same time, the New Tango was also associated with the developmentalist projects of the Frondizi era. The middle-class dream of cosmopolitan modernization may well have survived the 1966 military coup that shuttered Argentine democracy. Yet social conflict and state violence were increasing, a trend that would culminate in 1969 with massive, popular uprisings in Córdoba, Rosario, and elsewhere. In the context of deepening polarization, those earlier political projects—premised on the optimistic pursuit of a class alliance—seemed to

belong to a very different era, and Piazzolla's music lost its capacity to represent contemporary Buenos Aires.

Piazzolla responded to this challenge by borrowing from rock. Impressed by the commitment of young Argentine rockers to artistic authenticity over commercialism, he applauded them for having "swept away" the Nueva Ola by offering music that was "an expression of spiritual necessities."⁷⁷ Piazzolla was ambivalent about rock nacional: he criticized Argentine rockers like Charly García and insisted that they would only fulfill their potential when they studied the works of modern composers like Bartok and Schoenberg. Still, he believed that any contemporary music capable of appealing to young people needed to engage with "the noise . . . all of that crazy thing that all of us like."⁷⁸ As Fischerman and Gilbert argue, the influence of post-*Sgt. Pepper's* rock is apparent in the increasing length of Piazzolla's new songs as well as their structure. In place of the elaborate counterpoint of his earlier work, many of his new pieces were built on a succession of solos. Piazzolla seemed to have turned away from the cool jazz of the early 1960s in order to engage with the progressive rock of groups like Emerson, Lake and Palmer. This influence was apparent in his choice of instrumentation as well: on his first Italian album, *Libertango*, from 1974, Piazzolla's ensemble included drums, electric bass, and a Hammond organ.⁷⁹ At the same time, Piazzolla gave up skinny ties, grew a beard and affected a hippie look.⁸⁰

Piazzolla's effort to reconnect with young audiences in Argentina and elsewhere, as well as to place himself back on the cutting edge of popular music culminated in the formation of the Conjunto Electrónico in 1975. Explicitly modeled on such jazz fusion bands as Weather Report and Return to Forever, the new group included electric bass, synthesizer, and perhaps most strikingly, drums. In a sense, fusion provided an obvious model for Piazzolla. By incorporating electric instruments and rock rhythms, established jazz musicians like Miles Davis, Chick Corea, and Herbie Hancock were crafting a genre that could claim both the artistic seriousness of jazz and the mass appeal of rock. Fusion thus offered Piazzolla the possibility of connecting to a large transnational audience while continuing to make serious music for listening. The new band toured Brazil, played New York's Carnegie Hall, disbanded and then reunited for one final performance in December 1976 at the Gran Rex Theatre in Buenos Aires. The concert was a major event, attracting a sellout crowd and a great deal of coverage from the media. For Argentine rock musicians and fans, the Conjunto Electrónico amounted to a gesture of support from an old master; it began to heal the generational rift between rock and tango and even encouraged some rockers to experiment with incorporating the bandoneón in their own music.⁸¹

FIGURE 3.4 • Piazzolla in the 1970s. Courtesy of the Archivo General de la Nación.



Piazzolla's experiment in fusion represented a major departure. For his European recordings of 1974, he had already incorporated drums and electric bass, and he had simplified his arrangements, opting for a standard string section instead of the rich, multipart counterpoint of the quinteto. But for the *Conjunto Electrónico*, he went much further. The changes are audible on the live recording of "500 Motivaciones," an eleven-minute jam Piazzolla composed for the Grand Rex concert.⁸² Instead of the tango yeites of his earlier work, the piece is filled with the electronic sounds of the synthesizer, drum rolls, and an electric guitar scratching out chords in funk style. Most notably though, the piece does away almost entirely with Piazzolla's rhythmic signature, the 3+3+2, and in fact with any rhythmic allusion to tango tradition. With the exception of violinist Antonio Agri, all of the musicians in the *Conjunto Electrónico* came from jazz backgrounds (including Piazzolla's son Daniel, who played the synthesizer), a sign of Piazzolla's intent to move even further from tango tradition. Bassist Adalberto Cevasco, just a couple of years after his work on Gato Barbieri's *Impulse* albums, avoids *marcato* and *arrastre* entirely in favor of a busy style reminiscent of other fusion bassists.

Poet and rock critic Miguel Grinberg criticized “500 Motivaciones” for its lack of originality: “It refries for an uninformed public the dominant sound (here with a bandoneón) of Euroamerican jazz-rock. In short, Astor Piazzolla, without wanting to, has become traditional.”⁸³ Piazzolla would soon reach the same conclusion. After playing a series of concerts in Paris in 1977 with a new version of the Conjunto Electrónico, Piazzolla abandoned the fusion experiment entirely. Asked later why he turned away from electric instruments and the drum set, he explained, “Because it sounds like American or English music, and for that there is Herbie Hancock. I prefer to be myself.”⁸⁴ The account he offered Natalio Gorín was even more illuminating:

The French, who know my work well, questioned me: “What’s up with you, Piazzolla? What are you doing with this group? The world is full of electric guitars and basses, synthesizers and organs. Doing this you are only one more in the bunch. But with the acoustic instruments you have one of the best groups in the world. Go back to the Quintet.” I thought about it and concluded, these people are right. I am Piazzolla. My music is related to tango. . . . The group sounded nice, true, but it was not true Piazzolla. In those days, Chick Corea’s electric band, Return to Forever, was in fashion, and I got carried away.⁸⁵

Renouncing the Conjunto Electrónico as derivative, an attempt to copy international trends, Piazzolla grounded his own change of heart in the aesthetic judgment of French listeners. Just a few years earlier, his move to Europe led to *Libertango*, an effort to craft a more broadly accessible version of his music. Now, by contrast, appealing to European tastes entailed a return to the New Tango style he had invented in the early 1960s. In part, this about-face reflected the perennial difficulty of achieving popularity and cosmopolitan hipness without selling out or diluting his Argentine authenticity. But by abandoning fusion, Piazzolla was also responding to an important shift in the European and North American musical soundscape. This shift, which would culminate in the late 1980s with the advent of “world music” as a marketing category, entailed a new interest in exotic popular music genres from the underdeveloped world. By the late 1970s, Piazzolla began to recognize that he could successfully reach an international audience by “being myself,” that is, by offering the New Tango as an expression of his national identity.

Ironically, in order to satisfy the new Euro-American demand for musical difference, Piazzolla needed to reconfigure his music as an expression of Argentineness. This entailed both a return to the quintet format and a literal return to Buenos Aires. In an interview with the press, he stressed that he was

coming home in order to renew his contact with “the nontransferable landscape of Buenos Aires,” to be closer to the memory of Troilo, who had died three years earlier, and “to experience a resurrection in the soul of what was the golden age of the 1940s.”⁸⁶ Piazzolla thus envisioned his move as a deliberate deepening of his connection to Argentina and its tango tradition. His new quintet included the jazz pianist Pablo Zeigler, but the violinist and bassist were both tango veterans, and the guitar chair was reserved for familiar faces: first, Oscar López Ruiz, who played in the Quinteto Nuevo Tango for most of the 1960s, and later Horacio Malvicino, a founding member of the Octeto Buenos Aires in 1955. Beginning in May 1978, the new quintet played eight shows per week at the Auditorio Buenos Aires and then launched an extended run of international touring. As the world music trend developed over the course of the 1980s, Piazzolla’s new music was well suited to European and North American tastes. As Thomas Turino has argued, the musicians who achieved commercial success in the world music market in the 1980s combined “foreign distinctiveness” with aesthetics that were accessible to cosmopolitan audiences.⁸⁷ Piazzolla’s bandoneón as well as the distinctive articulation and yeites played on the violin and bass satisfied the former requirement, while the New Tango’s deep engagement with 1950s-era jazz fulfilled the latter. As a result, it was in this period that Piazzolla finally achieved international stardom.

Whereas most world music appealed to fans of rock, Piazzolla’s music found a different niche. The new quintet’s first foreign gig was in Brazil at São Paulo’s First International Jazz Festival in September 1978. The festival was a collaboration with the Montreux Jazz Festival, and its lineup reflected the eclectic vision of Claude Nobs, the longtime director of the Swiss event. Almost since its inception in 1967, Montreux had featured American rock, blues, and soul musicians alongside performers from across the jazz spectrum. In 1978, Nobs created a “Brazil night,” including performances by Gilberto Gil, Aírto Moreira, and choro band A Cor Do Som. The São Paulo Festival later that year was an extension of this effort. Among the performers were North American jazz icons Dizzy Gillespie, Chick Corea, and Benny Carter and local heroes Milton Nascimento, Egberto Gismondi, and Hermeto Pascoal. But the big attraction on opening night was none other than Astor Piazzolla. During the next decade, as the quintet toured extensively in Japan, Europe, and the Americas, it was frequently featured at jazz festivals. Although the presence of Piazzolla in these festivals struck some Argentine observers (and occasionally Piazzolla himself) as odd, it reflected the influence of world music on the international jazz scene. Following the quintet’s performance at the Montreal International Jazz Festival of 1984, one Canadian critic raved, “The composi-

tions of the Argentine creator derive from the tango of his country, but they are modern, original, biting, overwhelming, and irresistible.”⁸⁸ Foreign listeners steeped in the vanguardism of modern jazz responded to Piazzolla’s music as a modernist take on a rich, national tradition.

At the Montreal festival, Piazzolla renewed contact with jazz vibraphonist Gary Burton (they had met in Buenos Aires in 1965, when Burton accompanied Stan Getz on a South American tour), and the two made plans to work together. Piazzolla composed new material for the collaboration, and Burton played with the quintet in the group’s swing through the European jazz festival circuit in 1985. Their performance at Montreux was recorded and released on Warner Brothers. In his memoir, Burton discusses the apprehension he felt about playing with the quintet: “Astor Piazzolla’s music is very complex and intrinsically modern—qualities I admire in jazz, as well, but tango is the national music of another country, and it took me a while to get over that.”⁸⁹ Here again is the combination of accessibility and difference that attracted jazz musicians and fans to the New Tango. In earlier periods, musicians achieved commercial success with hybrids of Latin American genres and jazz. The Afro-Cuban jazz of Machito, bossa nova, the third worldism of Gato Barbieri, and the Cuban- and Brazilian-influenced work of fusion groups like Return to Forever are all examples of this sort of hybrid. Piazzolla’s entrance into the international jazz scene of the 1980s was different. The pieces that Piazzolla wrote for his set with Burton were classic New Tango; the composer made no concessions to jazz rhythm, improvisation, or phrasing. By “being myself,” returning to his style of the early 1960s, Piazzolla appealed to the desire of jazz musicians and fans to experience music that was as complex and modern as jazz but arose from a different, even exotic tradition.

Piazzolla appealed to North American world-music sensibilities precisely because he now avoided any association with Latin music. As modern dance music built on Afro-Caribbean traditions, Latin genres like salsa and merengue would seem to have fit the world-music model. Yet even as they gained enormous audiences among U.S. Latinos and throughout Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, these genres were ignored by world music audiences and record labels. For these audiences, Latin music was tainted by its popularity among working-class, Latino communities; it sounded like crass commercialism rather than the expression of an exotic tradition. By contrast, when Cuban music began to trickle back into the United States with the slight easing of the trade embargo in the early 1990s, its overt Afro-Cuban aesthetic made it sound and look exotic, and the world music industry responded enthusiastically.⁹⁰ Piazzolla’s case is similar, even if he did not choose to highlight the

tango's African roots. Like salsa and merengue artists, successful world-music acts like the Nigerian King Sunny Adé, the Zimbabwean Thomas Mapfumo, or the Cuban Buena Vista Social Club offered hybrid musical forms that combined foreign musical traditions with modern aesthetics that were familiar to cosmopolitan audiences. But they were hybrids that presented themselves as irreducibly different. Having abandoned his fusion experiments of the 1970s, Piazzolla now appealed in precisely this way.

Thanks to this repackaging, Piazzolla finally gained a significant North American audience in the late 1980s, when he joined with producer Kip Hanrahan to make a series of albums for Hanrahan's small American Clavé label. Piazzolla was introduced to Hanrahan by Horacio Malvicino, whose son worked as a sound engineer for American Clavé. Piazzolla had been frustrated by his inability to lure young audiences away from rock, and he was likely attracted to Hanrahan's youth (Hanrahan was thirty-three years younger than the Argentine) as well as to his reputation as an avant-garde musician with big ears. On several albums released in the early 1980s, Hanrahan had assembled a diverse collective of musicians in order to produce a complex, idiosyncratic, and unpredictable blend of jazz, rock, and Cuban music. These albums were particularly well received in French publications like *Le Monde*, whose critic described Hanrahan as "the Jean-Luc Godard of music today."⁹¹ Still, Hanrahan grew up in the Bronx and had deep roots in Cuban-derived music. Thus, just as it had in 1958, Piazzolla's effort to build a North American audience once again entailed collaborating with elements of the New York Latin jazz scene. Nevertheless, the results were very different this time around. Like Gary Burton, Hanrahan recognized Piazzolla first and foremost as a tango musician, and he heard tango as a distinctive musical tradition with a behind-the-beat rhythmic feel that contrasted sharply with that of Cuban music. Partly as a result, Hanrahan restrained his own impulse to experiment with Piazzolla, recording two albums—*Tango Zero Hour* (1986) and *La Camorra: Solitude of a Passionate Provocation* (1989)—that featured the current lineup of the quintet playing a mixture of recent compositions and classic pieces from Piazzolla's oeuvre.⁹² *Tango Zero Hour* opens with a cacophony of laughter and chatter as the band chants a sort of New Tango formula: "Tango, tango, *tragedia, tragedia, comedia, comedia, quilombo, quilombo* (a lunfardo word for 'brothel' or 'mess')." This gesture, unprecedented for a Piazzolla album, had the effect of exoticizing the music, implying that its roots lay in a mysterious and alien culture, and thereby positioning the music within a world-music frame.

Hanrahan's careful mastering and the individual styles of the players are noticeable throughout the two albums, yet the new versions of older material—

“Milonga del Angel” from 1965, “Michelangelo ’70,” “Soledad” and “Fugata” from 1969, “Concierto para Quinteto” from 1971—differ only subtly from their originals. Piazzolla’s decision to revisit pieces from this particular period—when the New Tango had achieved its definitive form in the hands of the earlier quintet—reveals a strategic calculation: this was the musical style best suited to appeal to the new demand for world music. This is not to suggest that Piazzolla was no longer capable of producing anything new. On the contrary, the new pieces on the American Clavé albums are impressive, particularly the three-part “La Camorra” suite, which, as Omar García Brunelli has demonstrated, manages to combine a series of variations on the “Rain Chant” from Woodstock with clear stylistic allusions to the aggressive, or *canyengue*, sound of early tango.⁹³ “La Camorra” reveals that having returned to the quintet-based, New Tango of the 1960s, Piazzolla found that he had not yet exhausted its potential for original expression.

Before the 1980s, Piazzolla’s attempts to attract a North American audience had largely failed. After recording an album with the saxophonist Gerry Mulligan in 1974, he told the Argentine press that he hoped the collaboration would allow him to penetrate the U.S. market, even that it would achieve for the New Tango what Stan Getz’s recordings had for bossa nova.⁹⁴ Instead, Piazzolla was largely ignored in the United States. His 1976 Carnegie Hall performance was poorly attended and failed to impress the critics.⁹⁵ North American music writers dismissed his work as “predictable high-class kitsch” or complained that all of his pieces sounded the same.⁹⁶ In the early 1980s, though, conditions began to shift, particularly in New York. This period saw a flowering of Latin jazz in the city with the emergence of a new generation of Latino bandleaders like Jerry González and Jorge Dalto as well as a host of active performance spaces, including the famous Monday night “Salsa Meets Jazz” series at the Village Gate.⁹⁷ These collaborations and fusions helped bring the rhythms of salsa to a mainstream audience. In 1982, Larry Gold opened the downtown nightclub, Sounds of Brazil (S.O.B.’s), whose offerings quickly expanded from Brazilian music to world music more generally. In the context of this new receptiveness to music from Latin America, tango acquired new visibility in the city: 1981 saw the surprising commercial success of the first album by the Tango Project, a New York trio led by Juilliard-trained accordionist, Bill Schimmel. Then, in 1985, *Tango Argentino*, featuring the work of legendary dancer and choreographer Juan Carlos Copes, opened on Broadway, earning rave reviews and packed houses. The show, which included several Piazzolla pieces, reignited North American interest in the tango and paved the way for a series of triumphant New York performances by Piazzolla. Throughout the late 1980s, his U.S. performances and American Clavé albums inspired nothing but enthusiasm. By

1988, the *Washington Post* included Piazzolla in a survey of the new “world music” that was transforming the pop music scene.⁹⁸

In his self-presentation to North American audiences, Piazzolla walked a fine line, stressing both his status as a musical innovator and his Argentine authenticity. In every interview he gave to North American critics, Piazzolla rehashed his own biography, emphasizing the extent to which the classic tango musicians had initially rejected the New Tango. This narrative positioned Piazzolla as a modernist revolutionary, an effect reinforced by the critics’ tendency to stress the cosmopolitan influences in his music. Jon Pareles, for example, noted a range of influences on Piazzolla, including Bach, Bartok, Ravel, and “boogie-woogie bass lines.” Yet after noting the music’s debt to classical music and jazz, Pareles concluded the article with a Piazzolla quotation that emphasized his identity: “In Buenos Aires you live this kind of music, and my music is a part of the city. No one can play a waltz like the Viennese or a bossa nova like the Brazilians; nobody can play a tango like us.”⁹⁹ In the context of the world music boom and the new American receptiveness to foreign music, Piazzolla described himself less as an iconoclastic innovator and more as the bearer of an authentic tradition.

Even though Piazzolla had reassembled the quintet with an eye toward the European and North American markets, the strategy also paid dividends in Argentina. To a certain extent, this was an instance of the familiar phenomenon whereby first world success translates into prestige at home. But there was more to it than that. In 1979, Miguel Grinberg, who just three years earlier had roundly dismissed the *Conjunto Electrónico*, raved about a Buenos Aires club date by the quinteto:

Not everything Piazzolla has done in these decades has been on target. But Tuesday in the Fantasy Cinema, the man and the musician stood up in a unique image of harmony, in one of those sounds that penetrates to the bones. . . . I remember one night 14 years ago, in the now-disappeared Altillo Theater, a performance of Astor Piazzolla’s *Quinteto Nuevo Tango*. . . . All of us were, of course, younger in our skin and in our dreams. . . . We are older now. And if the years have altered people’s paths and changed the face of the city, that music prevails and has grown. And it hits hard, how it hits, and it brings, in addition to its urban cadence and the pain that does not fade away, the gaze of those who died, the caress and the smile, infinite walks until dawn, children asleep in the garden of innocence. . . . Another decade ends and Piazzolla is more current than ever.¹⁰⁰

Piazzolla's music had already begun to provoke nostalgia in Argentine listeners during the late 1960s, and Grinberg's account suggests that this effect persisted. But Grinberg was not simply describing a generic nostalgia. His use of the term *disappeared* and his references to "those who died" and to lost innocence were veiled allusions to the brutal repression then being carried out by Argentina's military government. Just three days before Grinberg's article was published, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights had concluded a two-week visit to Argentina to investigate claims of human rights abuses, and for the first time the accusations of human rights organizations were now receiving substantial (if largely dismissive) coverage in the heavily censored Argentine media.¹⁰¹ This context sharpened the nostalgic associations evoked by Piazzolla's current music, based as it was on a model built in the period before the violent dictatorships of the 1960s and 1970s. Grinberg's commentary suggests that the New Tango now reminded many Argentines of a period they associated with innocence and optimism.

In the aftermath of the transition to democracy in 1983, the capacity of Piazzolla's music to provoke nostalgia was recognized and reinforced by filmmaker Fernando "Pino" Solanas. Solanas, a leftist activist and one of the founders of Argentina's Cine Liberación, was forced to leave the country shortly after the 1976 coup. After the fall of the dictatorship, he began work on a film that would capture the experience of Argentines in exile. A French-Argentine co-production, *Tangos: El exilio de Gardel* (1985) tells the story of a group of Argentine exiles in Paris who are trying to produce a work of music, theater, and dance—a "tanguedia"—based on messages sent to them from a compatriot still living in Buenos Aires. The film opens with an image of a bridge over the Seine. Next we see a bandoneonist in the shadows under the bridge and hear the first strains of "Duo de Amor," one of several compositions Piazzolla wrote for the film. As the whole quintet joins in on the soundtrack, a couple appears on the bridge and dances a balletic tango. The opening image of the bridge and the explicit linkage of tango music and dance with recognizable images of Paris (including Notre Dame Cathedral) symbolize the feelings of "in-betweenness" and displacement characteristic of exile.¹⁰² They also evoke the tension in Piazzolla's music between cosmopolitan influences and tango tradition and between producing world music for European and North American audiences and tango for Argentines.

At first blush, Solanas's decision to turn to Piazzolla for his film's soundtrack seems strange. While Piazzolla's politics had never been particularly coherent, his anti-Peronism and his failure to distance himself from the military government made him an unlikely ally for this militant of the Peronist left.¹⁰³

Yet Solanas wanted to avoid restricting the audience for *Tangos* to those Argentines who shared his political affiliation: “[In *Tangos*] I don’t speak from the political position of certain exile sectors. I speak from the position of a united Argentine people, faced with one overwhelming enemy—the military dictatorship and its foreign accomplices.”¹⁰⁴ Here, the tango—which the well-meaning French characters in the film do not quite understand—represents a unifying Argentine national identity. But why, then, Piazzolla, who had so famously broken with national tradition by incorporating foreign influences? As a young man, Solanas had worked as a music reporter for Frigerio’s developmentalist news magazine, *Qué*.¹⁰⁵ Years later, he reminisced about the powerful way Piazzolla’s New Tango spoke to his generation: “When we heard that Octeto Buenos Aires, we could not believe it. It filled an emptiness in us; it was something that we had never imagined but we needed.”¹⁰⁶ Solanas made his debut as a filmmaker in 1962, just as Piazzolla launched his tango revolution. For Solanas, as for Grinberg, who was just one year his junior, Piazzolla evoked the optimism of his youth. For the many Argentines who saw Solanas’s prize-winning film, Piazzolla’s music was now directly linked to this generationally specific nostalgia. Solanas deepened the association by employing another Piazzolla soundtrack in *Sur* (1988), a film that recounts the story of a young man released from prison at the end of the dictatorship.

Although Piazzolla never attracted a huge audience in Argentina—with self-deprecation, he referred to himself as “two Rexes,” meaning that he had enough local fans to sell out Buenos Aires’s Gran Rex Theatre two times but no more¹⁰⁷—he did enjoy substantial prestige in the 1980s. In June 1983, a few months before the elections that would restore Argentine democracy, he performed with a nonet and a symphonic orchestra at the Colón Theatre, the nation’s most prestigious temple of high culture. Over the next several years, the press followed his movements closely, lavishing praise on every new performance and celebrating his triumphs abroad. To North American critics and collaborators like Jon Pareles, Gary Burton, and Kip Hanrahan, Piazzolla’s music sounded like an innovative, modernist take on a distinctive, national tradition. By contrast, for Argentine listeners, the music was comforting in its familiarity. As the critic Napoleón Cabrera put it in his review of a 1983 show, “Twenty years were nothing, because Astor’s journey was foreseeable then, and he is accomplishing it now.”¹⁰⁸ For René Vargas Vera, reviewing a performance three years later, the first song of the night was immediately recognizable: “In that first number is almost all the Piazzolla we recognize: the syncopated whirlwind, the lyrical intermission of slow, long notes and accelerated short ones.”¹⁰⁹ In the late 1960s, this sense of recognition brought accusations of

staleness, but by the 1980s, familiarity was cause for celebration. As they confronted the multiple challenges of the democratic transition, many Argentines seemed to welcome what they heard as a musical reminder of an earlier time.

Astor Piazzolla's music, as well as the meanings that attached to it, emerged from the complex interaction between transnational and national contexts. His studies in the European classical tradition gave him many of the compositional tools that he would bring to bear on the tango, while the cool jazz of the 1950s provided him a model of how to do so. Yet he was unable to fully satisfy North American expectations of Latin music and, as a result, he failed to capture a significant audience in the United States. This failure actually facilitated his musical innovations of the early 1960s, since it encouraged him to avoid the fusion strategy that characterized bossa nova and other styles of Latin jazz. In other words, the New Tango sounded the way it did partly because Piazzolla failed to gain access to the United States market. By innovating from within tango, he crafted a music that reconciled modernity and Argentine authenticity and perfectly expressed the cosmopolitan nationalism of the porteño middle class in the post-Perón era. In the 1980s, the world music boom transformed tastes in the United States, creating a belated opportunity for the New Tango to capture a North American audience. Piazzolla's efforts to appeal to the exoticist impulses of North American audiences led him to revisit an earlier style at the very moment that nostalgic Argentine audiences hungered for a reminder of the era before military dictatorship and violent social conflict. Piazzolla's route through these transnational structures was almost the mirror image of Gato Barbieri's. Barbieri built a U.S. audience in the 1970s by adopting a Latin identity and appealing to conventional tastes for Latin music. Yet precisely because it embraced a long-standing, North American commercial aesthetic, Barbieri's Latin jazz was not of interest to the world-music audiences of the 1980s and 1990s, who sought more exotic products. By contrast, Piazzolla never succeeded in attaching himself to Latin sounds or styles. At the time of his death in 1992, he remained, both at home and abroad, a powerful symbol of a cosmopolitan Argentine national identity.