Astor Piazzolla: Cuatro Estaciones Porteñas (Four Seasons of Buenos Aires)

It might be difficult for anyone outside Argentina to understand that country’s unquenchable passion for tango. It is a passion bordering on obsession, a passion almost on a par with the fervor with which porteños (the natives of Buenos Aires) scream themselves hoarse over Lionel Messi and futbol. Beginning in the low-rent districts of the Argentine capital in the late 19th century, tango rose from its humble origins to become the nation’s national dance and cultural symbol. Argentines take their tango very seriously indeed; when tango idol Carlos Gardel died in a plane crash in 1935, dozens of women throughout Central and South America attempted suicide.

Astor Piazzolla was born in Buenos Aires in 1921. At the age of four, his family moved to New York. While growing up in the United States, he learned the bandoneón (the prototypical tango instrument, similar to a concertina) and piano. From an early age, Piazzolla felt that the conservative style of traditional tango was artistically unsatisfying. He studied composition with the great Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera and orchestral conducting with Hermann Scherchen. The music he wrote in his early 20s merged the essential features of tango with elements of jazz and proto-Stravinskian melodies and harmonies.

In 1954 Piazzolla moved to Paris to study composition with the legendary Nadia Boulanger, who numbered composers as diverse as Aaron Copland, Elliott Carter, Quincy Jones, and Philip Glass as her students. Piazzolla first kept his background a secret from Boulanger, but in one lesson she asked him to play one of his tangos for her. At its conclusion, Boulanger urged him to devote himself to tango and to follow his true compositional voice, advice which Piazzolla heeded for the rest of his life.

Piazzolla introduced elements of jazz, rock, polytonality, and improvisation into the traditional tango form to create tango nuevo (new tango). This new tango was harsher, grittier and angrier than the polite salon tango of the previous 30 years. His concerts and recordings brought tango nuevo to audiences around the world. He became close friends with the great Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, and had a fruitful artistic partnership with the poet Horacio Ferrer, with whom he wrote the “tango opera” María de Buenos Aires. Throughout his career he experimented with different combinations of instruments, and musicians from Yo-Yo Ma to Al DiMeola have continued to embrace and popularize his music.

Piazzolla’s Cuatro Estaciones Porteñas were not originally intended as a complete composition, and were composed at different times. Originally written for his touring quintet of bandoneón, violin, piano, electric guitar and double bass, the version we hear this evening is for piano and string orchestra in an arrangement by José Bragato. All four works are infused with the melodic yearning and rhythmic vitality of the tango, but include the modernist harmonies and percussive textures that Piazzolla learned from Ginastera and Boulanger. In many ways, these works are much like the dance-based works of Piazzolla’s idol, Johann Sebastian Bach – inspired by dance, but intended for the nightclub and concert hall. Though they are a tribute to the passing seasons, they are also Piazzola’s homage to Buenos Aires, the city that gave tango to the world.

Antonio Vivaldi: Il Quattro Stagioni (The Four Seasons)

With the advent of the Baroque style at the beginning of the 17th century, the violin family gradually replaced the older viol family as the prominent string instruments of the time. Violin music gradually transformed from the vocal style of the early 17th century to the more idiomatic style of the later Baroque, where the music reflected the particular capabilities of the instrument.

Antonio Vivaldi’s early training was both theological and musical. Ordained as a priest at age 25, chronic asthma prevented him from ever saying Mass. After his ordination, he worked as the music director for the Ospedale del Pia in Venice, ostensibly a home for orphaned girls, but in practice a home for the illegitimate daughters of nobility. Vivaldi trained these young women as singers, instrumentalists and composers, developing their musical skills to a highly professional level. It was for these musicians that Vivaldi wrote the bulk of his over 600 concertos for various instruments, from the typical (violin, cello, flute) to the more exotic (hurdy-gurdy, bagpipes). Through the publication of his works, his innovative violin technique became widely known and imitated throughout Europe.

Vivaldi’s Four Seasons are so familiar to us today that it is difficult for us to realize how modern they were when first written. His music stretched the boundaries of violin technique, employing rapid scale passages, double stops in high positions, rapid string crossings and a wide variety of complicated bowing techniques.

Vivaldi’s wealth of musical invention creates vivid pictures of life throughout the year. La primavera’s opening movement takes us through a kaleidoscope of twittering birds, gentle spring breezes and a brief spring thundershower. Its slow movement is a perfect vignette of a lazy spring day, complete with a shepherd’s barking dog (portrayed by the principal viola). The final movement is a rustic dance, reminiscent of music for the pífa, the Italian country bagpipes. The sighing figures that open L’estate make the languor of a hot summer day almost palpable, and the subsequent Allegro brings swarms of biting and stinging insects. The final Presto unleashes a full summer thunderstorm, with thunder and lightning portrayed in brilliant passages for both the soloist and the orchestra. L’autunno begins with the boisterous revelry of the harvest, complete with a rather tipsy soloist who seems to have had a rather substantial taste of the most recent vintage. A quick nap for the revelers (Adagio molto) precedes the hunt of the finale, replete with the sounds of galloping horses, barking hounds and shotgun volleys. The freezing temperatures and ferocious winds of L’inverno are invoked by the eerie opening harmonies (played ponticello, next to the bridge of the instrument) and the explosive orchestral tutti which follows. The soloist is affected by the cold as well; his teeth chatter, courtesy of a series of chords high on the top two strings. In the Largo, Vivaldi sketches a cozy scene by the fire, with the soloist singing sweetly over the pizzicato raindrops and dripping icicles of the orchestra. The finale takes us back out into the freezing outdoors, full of wind, snow and crackling ice.

For the first publication of The Four Seasons, four sonnets were included with the music, each corresponding to a different concerto and describing the sound pictures of each movement. The author of these sonnets is unknown, but the most likely author is the composer himself. We have included these sonnets as a separate insert in this program.