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Tango quartet performs with flare and rhythm

By Felicia Kuperwaser | October 23, 2012

On Saturday night, the Pablo Ziegler Classical Tango Quartet concluded their four-day stay at Brandeis with a captivating performance at Slosberg Music Center. A special occasion in its own right, this concert provided a perfect capstone to this year's MusicUnitesUS program of events. The concert celebrated and showcased different elements of creativity and a synthesis of artistic ideas that the ensemble explored with a variety of audiences at the University at various events in the last few days.



Performing were Pablo Ziegler, piano; Héctor Del Curto, bandoneón, a type of accordion used in tango performances; Jisoo Ok, cello and Pedro Giraudo, bass. Through their expert performance, the quartet successfully communicated the thematic and semantic elements of tango in a way that was both meaningful and stimulating. They synthesized different musical styles and in doing so captured the tensions both inherent and unique to the music itself and addressed the broader theme of cultural exchange across time and place.

Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992) was an Argentinian composer and bandoneon player whose legacy of "Nuevo tango" brought the musical style into the concert halls by combining it with elements of classical and jazz composition. A student of Piazzolla's work, Ziegler made unique contributions to tango that bring to light exactly what makes the music so stirring and provocative. His innovation in tango makes it relevant as an art form as much in the concert hall as it was on the streets in its original form. Ziegler played in Piazzolla's quintet until he formed his own ensemble in 1990. A Grammy-winning musician, Ziegler carries on Piazzolla's legacy by arranging his music and innovating further in his own compositions, blending jazz improvisations with characteristic tango rhythms and harmonic constructs. The concert featured both his arrangements of Piazzolla's music and his original compositions, highlighting both Ziegler's origins and innovations. His style is perfectly suited to Brandeis, whose own musical legacy values exploration of different musical ideas within a disciplined framework, for a greater creative purpose.

The evening's program reflected the development of the Nuevo tango movement. It began with two professional tango dancers, Fernanda Ghi and Guillermo Merlo, who performed to a recording of Ziegler's quartet. The provocative dance introduced the notion of the power struggle present in the genre, the opposing forces and strengths of the two partners which, when in sync, create a beautiful unity, and when opposed create a palpable and compelling tension.

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Most striking about the style of dance, skillfully executed by Ghi and Merlo, was the stoic control of their upper bodies while their legs perpetuated drama and momentum. Bold and powerful, their legwork appeared almost isolated from the rest of their expressive movement, drawing them closer and pushing them further apart, until ultimately one of the dancers prevailed as Merlo dramatically dragged Ghi off stage at the end of the piece.

When Ziegler and his ensemble entered the stage following the dance, they began to play with a marked immediacy and spontaneous feel. The ensemble played as if inspired by the dance itself in that moment, perhaps as the music was originally played.

This momentum and energy lasted for the duration of the concert, as they alternately played compositions by Piazzolla and Ziegler. While Piazzolla's compositions sounded more typically Latin, infused with elements of classical and jazz composition, Ziegler's compositions sounded somewhat more contemporary, as he used the musical language of nuevo tango to evoke times and places beyond the streets of old Buenos Aires. Piazzolla's "Fuga y Misterio" (1968) is a beautiful fugue whose structure, Ziegler joked, rivals that of Bach's fugues, but whose theme is an unquestionably Latin-sounding one.

He used a distinctly classical form to write Latin-sounding music. Conversely, Ziegler's "La Fundicion" (2003), or "The Foundry," with its distinctly industrial and almost guttural, grating sound, combines elements of musical quality and rhythm to tell a story outside of this context but through the language of nuevo tango composition. Ziegler's arrangements quite literally mimic the actual dance form, with more rhythmic, passionately-charged gestures in the lower registers, propelling the restrained but emotionally charged melodies in the higher registers.

In all of the arrangements, the quartet experimented with a wide variety of sounds and musical styles: not just in the seamless blending of Latin, jazz and other types of musical ideas, but in the actual musical quality they produced. All members of the ensemble used their instruments as percussive instruments, drumming out the resolute rhythms while others were playing, reintroducing an element of 'street music'—even Ziegler drummed on the piano's fallboard at one point to create this effect and did so with a playful smile. The music's complexity and musicians' impeccable musical skill were easy to overlook given their cool, understated manner, particularly Ziegler's. But this attitude was decidedly a reflection of their comfort, ease and intimacy with the music, which proved very contagious. Each instrument assumed its role in musical conversation, amicably competing for the melody, and patiently stepping aside when appropriate. The opposing musical forces of different voices, rhythmic statements and genres worked side-by-side to create a unique musical environment which truly reflected both the music's origins and other musical influences.

Where Piazzolla's compositions brought the tango to the performance stage, Ziegler's original compositions bring nuevo tango back out to the streets with its more vibrant and visceral moments blended beautifully with old tango sound. The opposing forces of passion and restraint that form the common thread of tango are as relevant now as they were when tango was only found on the streets.

For the final piece, "Libertango" (1973) composed by Piazzolla, the dancers rejoined the ensemble halfway through the piece to bring the music back out to its original context. "It takes two to tango" takes on a new meaning in light of this musical exploration. Perhaps this old mantra refers not so much to the two dancers, but the two opposing forces, whether they are dancers, genres, forms or even the tension of past and present, whose combined forces, when they finally join, create a unity more powerful and provocative than each individually.