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Pablo Ziegler finds his own tango style

by ALEXANDER VARTY | FEB 12, 2013

THE QUESTION NEVER comes up, but the answer is perfectly clear: Pablo Ziegler never tires of talking about Astor Piazzolla. Within minutes of picking up the phone in his New York City apartment, the Argentine musician has skillfully avoided questions about his own background and is happily discoursing on the history of the man who was his employer from 1978 to 1989.

That's not entirely surprising. By combining elements of chamber music, jazz, and the dance-hall music of his Buenos Aires birthplace, Piazzolla invented the tango nuevo style that Ziegler specializes in today. And, if anything, Piazzolla's reputation has only grown since his death in 1992. Ziegler goes so far as to attribute the global revival of interest in double-reed instruments such as the accordion and concertina to Piazzolla's own adoption of their close relative, the bandoneon.



Of course, Ziegler's not going to let a simple squeezebox take pride of place over his own instrument, the piano.

"His father insisted on giving Piazzolla this small, black squeezy-box called the bandoneon, and he was an incredible performer, as a bandoneon player," Ziegler recalls. "But always he was composing with the piano. The instrument that he had a real passion for was the piano, and he had an incredible classical brain, you know. He was a genius as a composer."

There'll be ample proof of that when Ziegler brings his quartet of piano, bandoneon, guitar, and upright bass—plus a very special guest in the form of jazz violinist Regina Carter—to Vancouver this weekend. On the bill will be a number of Piazzolla's classic tango-nuevo compositions, plus some of the pianist's own.

Skilled as Ziegler is as an instrumentalist, composer, bandleader, and arranger, he nonetheless defers to his mentor when it comes to any advances that he might have brought to tango nuevo. His music is jazzier, he allows, but even that reflects the direction Piazzolla was headed in toward the end of his career.

"The last years with Astor, we were experimenting with him in a different, more free way," he says. "There was one tune that we were playing with him called 'Tristeza de un Doble A', meaning 'Blues From a Double A'. Doble A is a brand of bandoneon, the Alfred Arnold instruments. And this was really experimental, like a free improvisation with the quintet.

"That tune," he adds, "it was for me my starting point to continue experimenting with my music, no? I have very good classical skills; I spent more than 10 years at the Buenos Aires Music Conservatory. I studied probably the most conservative style, but through these years since I started with my own groups, I've tried to do my best to do something a little more contemporary."

Ziegler's compositional side—as opposed to the more improv-friendly material he'll perform with Carter—will be the focus of an upcoming release featuring Amsterdam's 52-piece Metropole Orchestra. "Of course everyone goes, 'This is not tango!' " he says cheerfully. "And I go, 'Okay. I don't care.' The new tango style has always been a mix, a crossover, between classical, jazz, and tango. That's what Piazzolla invented many years ago."