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Pianist Pablo Ziegler, vibraphonist Stefon Harris: These two take to tango

By Walter Tunis | 3.13.2014

Pablo Ziegler never thought much of tango at first. As a teenage pianist in Argentina, he was far more eager to embrace the possibilities of jazz than the traditions of what he termed "old people" music. Then he heard Ástor Piazzolla.

"I thought he was great," said Ziegler, 69. "I thought he was a genius for transforming the tango. He changed the entire mood of the music."

The rest of the world thought the same thing. By expanding the music's inherent mystery and romanticism to allow room for improvisation, Piazzolla forged a music and subsequent movement often referred to Nuevo Tango. Having been pianist in Piazzolla's band for more than a decade (from 1978 until the composer's retirement due to failing health in 1989), Ziegler rediscovered tango's dark beauty — especially in the way piano interacted with the accordion-like bandoneon.

"When Piazzolla called me, I was like, 'Really? You want to have me in your group?' So we met to talk, and I became a member of his quintet. Those years were like studying at a university. He put my mind in the music of my country."

Today, as the unequalled heir to Piazzolla's Nuevo Tango, Ziegler has been integral in the music's continued evolution and its kinship with jazz. Furthering the latter are occasional collaborative concerts with acclaimed American vibraphonist Stefon Harris. The two perform together Saturday at Centre College's Norton Center for the Arts in Danville.

"I have a strong appetite for challenges," Harris, said. "Tango was a style of music that I wasn't very familiar with. I had some level of awareness, but to be onstage with musicians who authentically live and play that music was an opportunity I couldn't pass up at the time. And once we got onstage, we felt there was this amazing chemistry that couldn't have been predicted."

For Harris, 40, collaborating with Ziegler falls in line with his working philosophy as a musician even if the music itself is often figuratively, and literally, foreign.

"One of my ambitions as a musician is to lead with empathy," Harris said. "Fundamentally, what we do is about connections and interactions between human beings, so I would like to think I could get onstage with someone for the very first time and if I'm listening and I'm aware and empathetic, I'll be able to find a connection almost immediately."

"One of the things I enjoy most about playing with Pablo in this setting is that it reminds me a lot of my classical training in terms of the attention to detail, the way you can phrase a melody. Everything is indicated with great specificity excluding, of course, the improvisation."



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Ziegler said he and Harris team for only perhaps five or six concerts a year. They have released only one album together, 2007's *Tango & All That Jazz*, a live document of a performance given at the Jazz Standard in New York the previous December.

"He has a fantastic memory," Ziegler said of Harris. "It's like he has a kind of library in his brain. He knows all the charts and has an incredible feeling for this music."

Said Harris: "Pablo is very open as a musician, so I don't feel like I have to completely mimic the style of tango. I'm allowed to bring my own voice there as well. But in order for me to contribute something, I have to understand what's going on first so I can contextualize that which I hope to contribute.

"Pablo is such a brilliant musician and plays such fantastic music. Playing with him has really had a great effect on my ability to grow."