

It takes two to tango,

THE Argentinean composer Astor Piazzolla probably did more than any other to give the tango the respectability of concert music, but his name was mud when he introduced his new tango — *tango nuevo* — in the 1960s and '70s.

The Buenos Aires *tangueros* resented their dance being gentrified as concert music. "Piazzolla moved the tango from the dance floor to the concert stage," says Pablo Ziegler, the pianist for Piazzolla's quintet from the mid-'70s to the mid-'80s.

"The *tangueros* love traditional tango — they use the tango mostly for dance. They wanted simple melodies, simple music, not complicated tangos, because they wanted to dance. Now Piazzolla is a hero; but even now, there are a lot of factions that say Piazzolla is not tango."

Ziegler is making a return visit to Sydney, after an appearance with the Sydney Symphony in 2001, to present a concert of Piazzolla tangos, which he has arranged for two pianos. He sounds drowsy on the phone from Buenos Aires; it is 9am in the Argentine capital and the phone call has got him out of bed.

Pablo Ziegler and Christopher O'Riley will let their hands do the dancing,

Such are the hours of the working musician.

Piazzolla studied in Paris with the famous composition teacher Nadia Boulanger and cited Bach as the most important influence on him. Many musicians in recent years have championed his music and taken it to a worldwide audience, particularly since the composer's death in 1992. The Latvian violinist Gidon Kremer has been a powerful advocate, recording Piazzolla's version of *The Four Seasons* — with the Argentinean movements interspersed with Vivaldi's — as well as Piazzolla's only opera, *Maria de Buenos Aires*. Others include the Argentina-born pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim and accordionist James Crabb, who has toured and recorded with the Australian Chamber Orchestra.

Ziegler, who spent a decade in Piazzolla's Quinteto Tango Nuevo, has an authority that comes from having played with the master. Music critic Mark Swed, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, says Ziegler is to Piazzolla what Sviatoslav Richter is to Prokofiev and

Seiji Ozawa is to Takemitsu. "First I started as a classical piano player and started to play jazz as a kid," says Ziegler, 61. "I was playing a lot of jazz music and improvising. Piazzolla, perhaps he called me at that time to play with him because of my improvisation knowledge. I started with Piazzolla and learned a lot with him about tango improvisation."

While the origins of tango are more complicated than they at first appear — bordellos are only part of the story — an image persists in the popular imagination of tango as a dance of desperate passion: roses clenched between teeth, pomaded hair and velvet gowns split to here. It is associated with the working poor, and with Buenos Aires brothels.

But Ziegler says that tango is an immigrant music, and not only from Europe. Its origins, as with so much music of the Americas, lie in African rhythms, and older dances such as the *habanera* and *milongo*. "[The *milongo*] became a tango rhythm, with a lot of black influence and Spanish influence."

The music has a nostalgic disposition and is invariably cast in minor keys. "*Tangueros* say the tango is a feeling you can dance," Ziegler says. "There are a lot of tango lyrics talking about feelings, sad feelings, from the immigrant people [who] came from Europe in the last two centuries."

Ziegler has adapted Piazzolla concert tangos from their original quintet arrangements into settings for two pianos.

The treatment, Ziegler says, wasn't his idea, but that of his record company. Ziegler wrote the arrangements in four months and they were recorded by him and pianist Emanuel Ax. Their album *Los Tangueros* was released in 1997, with tracks including the famous *Libertango* and *Michelangelo '70*, its opening reminiscent of Rachmaninov's second piano



Pablo Ziegler

Piazzolla-style

writes **Matthew Westwood**

concerto. "It's difficult, because all the Piazzolla [quintet] arrangements have a lot of counterpoint," Ziegler says. "It is not easy to divide the counterpoint between four hands. Also, you have always the same colour of the [piano] sound. I have to imagine a lot of combinations in these arrangements."

There is a tendency in the recording for the sound of two pianos to thicken in texture. Certainly, the most distinctive of tango sounds is missing. The bandoneon, an accordion-like instrument on which Piazzolla was a master, is what gives the tango its smoky bohemian wheeze.

So Ziegler draws out other aspects of the tango's character. He describes the style as *rubato cantabile*: the Italian phrase means to vary the tempo for greater expression, and to play with lyricism, in the manner of song.

"It's the way you try to dance when you play," Ziegler says. "That's the feeling, to reproduce the dance. Especially the bandoneon phrases, with a lot of *rubato cantabile*."

His duet partner in Sydney will be the

pianist Christopher O'Riley, who is also giving solo recitals of Shostakovich works and transcriptions of songs by Radiohead.

Ziegler says that, to be successful, the piano arrangements demand that the partners play as if they were "dancing with our hands".

"[O'Riley] is an amazing piano player," Ziegler says. "He is very flexible. He understood everything [about the tango] and is a very good partner for me."

Ziegler, who won a Latin Grammy award for best tango album for *Bajo Cero* last November, continues to see tango as an inspiration. In 2004 he was the musical director on a fully staged version of *Maria de Buenos Aires*, which toured throughout Europe. He is also writing new music — "Buenos Aires music" — to tour with the Pablo Ziegler Trio. "I transformed all my style from the jazz mood to the tango mood," Ziegler says. "Now that's what I do with my trio, and by myself."

Pablo Ziegler and Christopher O'Riley play Piazzolla for Four Hands as part of the Sydney Festival. City Recital Hall, Angel Place, tomorrow and Wednesday Parramatta, Thursday.