

**Astor Piazzolla's**  
**The four seasons of Buenos Aires**  
by Oscar Escalada

Astor Piazzolla has been without any doubt, the greatest Argentine popular musician. However, the opinion of Vinicius de Moraes - the composer of "Garota de Ipanema" with Tom Jobim goes further on: *"You Argentine people, do you know that Piazzolla is the best popular musician in the world?"* Or even when Dizzy Gillespie told him when introducing him to Gil Evans: *"Let me introduce to you the best musician in the world today and the best arranger."*

Astor was born in 1921 in Mar del Plata, a beautiful city 400 kilometers South of Buenos Aires, and died in Buenos Aires on July 4th 1992.

Since I was very young I have enjoyed his music with a group of friends that also loved jazz. At the beginning of the 70's I was lucky to record an LP in the same company as Astor used to record (Trova). This allowed me to meet him personally at a meeting arranged by the President of Trova to celebrate with us Christmas Holidays. That meeting had a great influence on my relationship with music. I found in Astor a man who had to fight very hard to be able to do what he really felt with his music, against a great disagreement and misunderstanding from the critics and prejudicial opinions. Today nobody argues against Piazzolla, but it was not always like this.

Piazzolla belongs to a kind of composers who write their music for the bands that they create and conduct, formed by very high standard instrumentalists. The same as Bach, his works are instrumented for the instruments that were available at that moment (in the case of Bach) or for the instruments they wanted (in the case of Piazzolla). He made arrangements of his own compositions for his octet, for string orchestra and bandoneon, for his quintet, his noneto, for symphonic orchestra and quintet and even for an electronic group.

If we happen to listen to the different versions that have been recorded by him in different opportunities, we will see that none of them is equal to the others. This is due to the instrumentation, or the presence or not of a virtuoso cadenza in the piano, or his improvisations, that obviously are never the same, etc.

Some days ago, I met a great Spanish choral conductor who became recently involved with Piazzolla's music. He was quite worried about achieving the correct version of an arrangement of one of Piazzolla's tangos that arrived at his hands. He bought some CDs by Piazzolla himself as well as by other interpreters that included works by him. He needed to present his choir in a contest, so he asked me, quite confused, which the real version of that tango would be, as none of the versions that he had heard were similar to one another.

My Spanish friend walked the same road that once, I heard, Rostropovich did every time he had to study a new composer that he did not know: he looked for the rest of this new composer's works to know him deeply and get into his spirit. But my friend was not that lucky. The reason for this is that Piazzolla did not write his music specifically for piano, or guitar, or bandoneon. His works were composed and arranged for the group that he had at that moment. If we read the original publications of his music published by Editorial Lagos in Argentina or Curci Milano in Italy, we will see that they include just the melody and the harmony. They are really written in a quite simple style just to comply with the requirements of the copyright but he did not do a "work for piano". None of the versions of Piazzolla matches what is published.

Transcribing instrumental music for choral groups brings about some difficulties mainly concerning the fact that instruments can do melodic jumps that are very difficult for voices, and they also have a much more extensive range. On the other hand, if one is working with great composers one must be very careful about what he wrote. Ward Swingle, for instance, did not modify a single note of those written by Bach when he arranged his music for his well-known group "The Swingle Singers". His hard job was to take those notes and distribute them to each voice of his octet and put them into a jazz context, adding a bass, drums and a lot of "swing". **The observance that he took for this task matches his human quality and musical sensitivity.** Marvelous work done by Ward!

But popular music does not follow the same patterns as classical music. Popular musicians design mainly a melody and add to it a harmony as support or accompaniment.

When they need to play it, they call an arranger unless they are able to do it themselves, as is the case with Tom Jobim, Geroge Gershwin or Astor Piazzolla.

Anyway, Piazzolla's case is still different. One would think that with the arrangement, his composition was done and ready to be performed. No sir, Astor modified his own arrangements and adapted them to the particular musical capacity of the musicians that were playing in his group at that time or when he changed the group. For "Adiós Nonino", for instance, he made about twenty arrangements in versions for his quintet, sextet and noneto, and also for symphonic orchestra and quintet for performing at the Teatro Colón of Buenos Aires. None of them is equal to those that were published.

How confused my Spanish friend was!

I remember that in one of the ACDA National Conventions, I attended a presentation by Robert Ray that he made with his wife Sylvia. Bob put the music of his wonderful "Gospel Mass" on the piano stand and told us: "This is written like this" and he played correctly what was written in the score and Sylvia sang it also correctly according to what we had in our handy sample copies. Then he said "but it has to be played like this", and he played it with all the swing that he has and Sylvia sang it with that great feeling that she has. It was another work. That small sample produced an ovation in the audience. One of the attendees, white, blond and well dressed with a beige coat and a nice cravat asked him: "How can we do, not being black, to get to do it in such a marvelous way as you did?" Bob took a little time and then asked this gentleman if he played the piano. "Yes", was the answer. "Do you play Beethoven?" "Yes", he replied. "Are you German?" asked Bob. "No, I come from Chicago". "I can imagine then that you have learned how to play Beethoven by studying at the University, at home, reading books about him and listening to his piano works from the piano of great pianists trying to go deeply inside his style, haven't you? You did not learn it because you are German or have lived in Germany. Well, my friend, this is the way you should learn this other style. There should be no difference. Listen to it quite a lot and let your spirit go, and if you want, you can even dance it".

Bob's answer was quite similar to Rostropovich's idea, wasn't it?

## The music of Piazzolla's

Since the Renaissance, there have been composers that have developed a technique called "logogenesis", or to put in the words of Zarlino (XVI Century) "*metere il testo in musica*" (put the text into music). This means to describe musically the text that you are using. Some composers, for instance, used descendant chromaticisms when they tried to describe sadness or death, or they used eight notes with fast ascendant movements for describing birds. Bach also used this technique in almost all his works, and it has been analyzed and meticulously described by Dr. Albert Schweitzer in his book "Bach, the poet musician". Then, composers like Beethoven in his Pastoral Symphony (6 Th) or Mendelsohn in his Summer night's dream, or Smetana in his symphonic poem The Moldava, just to mention some examples, described without the use of words, a day in the country, or the flowing of a river, or a theatre play by Shakespeare.

Many good composers have written music of Buenos Aires - the tango -, but the great difference is that the music of Piazzolla *is* Buenos Aires. Piazzolla was able to describe Buenos Aires, its busy everyday life, its traffic not quite respectful of traffic laws, its horns, its daily madness, its important nightlife. But also that melancholic spirit of the inhabitants of Buenos Aires that is inherited from their grandparents who have come from remote lands to which they could never go back, but they have never forgotten. The blend of architecture styles: the art nouveau of the beginning of the 900, the French and Italian style, the modern style and so many others. They all live together in a city that hosts more than six million people that run in it daily sharing their penury and their joy, their greatness and their miseries. The inhabitant of Buenos Aires, a mixture of braggart, ingenious, night-walker, suburban, gloomy, impatient, melancholic, homelike and tender. All this and much more is in the music of Piazzolla. **His music palpitates fast or calmly like the life of the people of Buenos Aires**, but one should never expect from it to be always the same, with the same tempo or the same energy. This would not be Buenos Aires, and let alone Piazzolla.

## The seasons of Buenos Aires

Astor Piazzolla composed Verano Porteño (summer of Buenos Aires) in 1996 and it was the first in the series of "The seasons". The other three were written in 1969.

The melodic structure of Verano, Otoño and Primavera (summer, autumn, and springtime) is similar and it is as follows:

Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 1'
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while theme 1 is quick, vigorous, fast theme 2 is calm, melancholic and expressive. Theme 1' is a recapitulation of theme 1 with some developments.

(Example 1)

The melody of Invierno (winter) is presented in a different way from the others but still keeps a relationship with them in the sense that there is a distinction between the calm and fast segments. Its structure is:

A + B	A + C	Coda
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while sections A, C and the coda are calm, melancholic and expressive, section B is quick, vigorous and fast.

(Example 2)

In some cases, Piazzolla adds an introduction to the themes previously quoted, as is the case with Verano and Otoño. However, these introductions do not have the same purpose in both tangos. In Verano it is part of the theme and it is there every time the theme 1 appears. But in Otoño it appears only at the beginning of the tango.

(Example 3)

Up to now I have described the thematic elements of the four tangos included in the series "The seasons of Buenos Aires". I must say now that these melodies, as they are shown in this article, are written as they appear in my arrangements for choir. The way of writing them has been getting as close as I could to the phrasing of the tango and to Piazzolla's style.

## Use of the bass

Piazzolla uses quite often the technique of the descendant bass. Sometimes it is chromatic as in Verano and Invierno and some others it is diatonic as in Primavera.

(Example 4)

Piazzolla also uses often the pedal-bass, on which he develops an interesting harmony. This pedal-bass can be presented with or without the upbeat grupetto.

(Example 5)

## Rhythm

Now I would like to make a parenthesis to show briefly the evolution of the rhythm of the tango.

At the beginning (late XIX Century and early XX century), the tango had a rhythm common to other rhythms of the Rio de la Plata such as candombe and milonga. The difference between them was the distribution of stresses.

Until 1930/40, the original rhythm began to change and a strong 4/4 was settled down. Currently, the tango players call this rhythm "in tango".

Finally, Piazzolla brought to the tango a division in 3+3+2.

(Example 6)

The use of this division may appear alone or juxtaposed to 4/4, which produces a distribution of stresses very distinctive of the music of Piazzolla.

Another characteristic of this music is the use of acephalous rhythms where the first eighth note is strongly stressed. We may find this in *Verano* and *Otoño* and I do use it in many of the arrangements as an accompanying pattern. (Example 7)

We can also see in the previous examples, the use of groups of two sixteenth notes that may be found on the upbeat (*Verano*) or on the beat (*Otoño*). They can also be used as mordents (as shown in the previous examples) or a jump between the two notes (Theme 1 of *Primavera*, section B of *Invierno*, etc.). I also use this rhythmic formula in my arrangements as an accompanying pattern too.

## The choral arrangements

Making an arrangement of music by Piazzolla presents a compromise that can be explained in this way: *Shall I make a new version or shall I respect Piazzolla's one?* In my case, I made a decision in both ways but getting closer to the second option. Well, now, *which of all his versions shall I take?* Please, remember that Piazzolla does not have just one version of his music and its publications do not have the richness that the composer put in his arrangements and performances.

Maurice Ravel was very careful not to interfere with the work of Modest Mussorgski in his instrumentation of "Pictures at an exhibition", but he had the full "work for piano" complete and finished. **This was not the case** and therefore what I finally did was to get as close as I could to the "average" of Piazzolla's versions.

One of the difficulties that I found doing these arrangements was that those who are not familiar with tango or Piazzolla's style would find the same difficulties as the one our blond friend found with Robert Ray: it is not possible to write the "swing". In addition we find in this case that some parts need to be sung as they are written, and others may be played with more freedom. I decided then to write meticulously each part. I failed in my first attempt due to the irregular rhythms that appeared, very difficult for sight-reading. So my final decision was to simplify them to the limit of being inexpressive.

The first arrangement that I made of the four seasons was *Verano Porteño*. I made it for my chamber choir in 1984, and it was a capella. At that moment I did not think that it could be published. It is not usual in Argentina to publish arrangements. Until I met Nancy Telfer in a presentation that I made in San Antonio, Texas in 1993 at the ACDA National Convention. It was a great surprise for me to see that she liked very much the arrangement and decided to include it in her series for her book "Successful Sight Singing", which was an honor for me.

Sometime later I talked with Mark Kjos about the idea of publishing a Latin American Music series. We called it for the first time "The Rodizio Project", because we were in Buenos Aires at the restaurant Rodizio. This is how the Latin American Music series came to be published by Neil A. Kjos Music Co. where the other three arrangements of "The seasons of Buenos Aires" by Astor Piazzolla have been included.

These three last arrangements (*Invierno*, *Otoño* and *Primavera*) are with piano and percussion. This is why I added an optional part for piano and percussion to the *a capella* version of *Verano Porteño*.

As we saw previously, some melodies are too instrumental as in *Otoño* and *Primavera*. In the choral arrangement these melodies are split between altos and sopranos in *Otoño*: (Example 8)

and tenors, altos and sopranos in *Primavera*. (Example 9)

I used a rhythmic pattern accompanying the melody that the piano plays in *Invierno* (measure 25) that is quite typical of tango: (Example 10)

To make this "tango" effect, it is recommended to stress the first note (eighth note) and produce a crescendo in the last one (half note). To add more tension, each measure should be sung by increasing the volume in a *crescendo sempre poco a poco*.

Finally, please pay attention to the words. Every time you find an "m" it should be sung immediately after the vowel. The sound of this consonant is used as a way of articulation and stressing. Obviously the pronunciation of the phonemes should be in Spanish.

I hope you can enjoy Astor Piazzolla's music as much as I do.