

Monday, July 28, 2014
Unity Chapel, 7:30 pm

Quinteto Yzafa

Quinteto Yzafa (pronounced "ee-SAH-fuh") is dedicated to a fresh, dynamic approach to traditional Argentine tango music. With backgrounds in classical music as well as jazz, bluegrass, Arabic music, Latin American folk and popular dance styles, the musicians will perform tangos, vales and milongas from the 1910s through the present day. Their dynamic new arrangements have variety and intensity but they never lose the danceable essence of the true tango.

The ensemble's sound features the bandoneón, the characteristic 71-button relative of the accordion whose distinctive timbre is essential for traditional tango music, filled out with the rich tones of a full string section (violin, cello and double bass) and piano.

Bandoneonist and composer Michael O'Brien was inspired by the Argentinian classical composer Astor Piazzola. "There was something about the combination of sinuous, expressive melody interspersed with periods of brutal dissonance and percussive playing that lodged itself in my memory," he says. That was the beginning of a life-long interest which has led him to learn Piazzola's own instrument, the bandoneón, travel to Argentina to study, research and perform tango music, and even to make a career out of it! In his day job, O'Brien is a professor of ethnomusicology. O'Brien has created for the group a repertoire of little-known and original tangos, vales and milongas as well as many tango classics, several of which we will hear this evening.

Quinteto Yzafa has passion and zing ... At times bold and brash and at other times heartbreakingly tragic, it covers every emotion in the spectrum. Enjoy!

THE TANGO

The tango is a partner dance that originated in the 1890s in working class districts of Buenos Aires and along the Río de la Plata, the natural border between Uruguay and Argentina.

Although it seems now to be the only possible hold for couple dancing, the tango is only the third dance in history done with the man and woman facing each other, with the man holding the woman's right hand in his left, and with his right arm around her.

The first dance done in this hold was the Viennese Waltz, which was a craze across Europe in the 1830s. Couple dancing before the Viennese Waltz was formal, with couples performing choreographed steps, and generally with no more physical contact than holding hands - if that (although some Renaissance dances could involve surprising levels of intimacy). The second couple dance to use this hold was the Polka, which became the fashion in the 1840s.

The third dance, the tango, was radically different from anything that came before it because it introduced the concept of improvisation for the first time, a huge influence on all couple dancing in the 20th Century.

The exact origins of tango—both the dance and the word itself—are lost in myth and an unrecorded history. The generally accepted theory is that in the mid-1800s, the African slaves who had been brought to Argentina or their descendants began to influence the local culture. The word "tango" may be straightforwardly African in origin, meaning "closed place" or "reserved ground." Or it may derive from Portuguese (and from the Latin verb *tangere*, to touch) and was picked up by Africans on the slave ships. Whatever its origin, the word "tango" had acquired the standard meaning of the place where African slaves and free blacks gathered to dance by the time Argentina banned slavery in 1853.

During the latter part of the 1800s and early 1900s, Argentina was undergoing a massive immigration. In 1869, Buenos Aires had a population of 180,000. By 1914, its population was 1.5 million. The intermixing of African, Spanish, Italian, British, Polish, Russian and native-born Argentines resulted in a melting pot of cultures, and each borrowed dance and music from one another. Traditional polkas, waltzes and mazurkas were mixed with the popular habanera from Cuba and the candombe rhythms from Africa.

Most immigrants were single men hoping to earn their fortunes in this newly expanding country. They were

typically poor and desperate, hoping to make enough money to return to Europe or bring their families to Argentina. The evolution of tango reflects their profound sense of loss and longing for the people and places they left behind.

Most likely, rudimentary dance forms that may have been known as "tango" were developed in African-Argentine dance venues. These venues were frequented by *compadritos*, young men—mostly native born, poor and of mixed ancestry—who liked to dress in slouch hats, loosely tied neckerchiefs and high-heeled boots with knives tucked casually into their belts. The *compadritos* took the dance to the Corrales Viejos—the slaughterhouse district of Buenos Aires—and introduced it in various low-life establishments where dancing took place: bars, dance halls and brothels. It was in these tenements where the African rhythms met the Argentine *milonga* music (a fast-paced polka). Soon new steps were invented and took hold as a new form of dance that combined traditions from many cultures. Exactly when and where the various forms of dance and music combined to create what became widely understood as tango is unclear. What is clear was that tango was considered a dance from the poor barrios.

Although high society looked down upon the activities in the barrios, well-heeled sons of the porteño oligarchy were not averse to slumming. Eventually, everyone found out about the tango and, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the tango as both a dance and as an embryonic form of popular music had established a firm foothold in the fast-expanding city of its birth. It soon spread to provincial towns of Argentina and across the River Plate to Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay, where it became as much a part of the urban culture as in Buenos Aires.

The worldwide spread of the tango came in the early 1900s when wealthy sons of Argentine society families made their way to Paris and introduced the tango into a society eager for innovation and not entirely averse to the risqué nature of the dance or dancing with young, wealthy Latin men. By 1913, the tango had become an international phenomenon in Paris, London and New York. There were tango teas, tango train excursions and even tango colors—most notably orange. The Argentine elite who had shunned the tango were now forced into accepting it with national pride.

The tango spread worldwide throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The dance appeared in movies and tango singers traveled the world. By the 1930s, the Golden Age of Argentina was beginning. The country became one of the ten richest nations in the world and music, poetry and culture flourished. The tango came to be a fundamental expression of Argentine culture, and the Golden Age lasted through the 1940s and 1950s.

Tango's fortunes have always been tied to social conditions, and this was very true in the 1950s. As political repression developed, lyrics reflecting political sentiments were banned as subversive. The dance and its music went underground as large dance venues were closed and large gatherings in general were prohibited. The tango survived in smaller, unpublicized venues and in the hearts of the people.

In 1950 the brilliant young bandoneonista Astor Piazzolla left Buenos Aires to go to Paris to study classical composition with Nadia Boulanger. Although born in Argentina, he had been taken to the United States as a small child. He went to Buenos Aires as a teenager and began playing in the orchestra of Anibal Troilo, doing there some wonderful arrangements, before forming his own orchestra in 1946. Surrounded by such musical riches, he realised that it would be hard to have the success that he wanted by staying within the Tango tradition. Taking elements of tango, elements of the jazz that he had heard as a child in the States, and classical ideas, Piazzolla created what he called 'Tango Nuevo,' New Tango. Determined that his music should be listened to rather than danced to, Piazzolla made the jazzy rhythms very different from what the dancers were expecting.

When "Tango Nuevo" was first heard in Buenos Aires, it caused outrage, with many people saying that it was so far from the tradition as not to be tango at all. But the cross fertilization with North American and European forms created something accessible and appealing to people not brought up with the tango tradition, and Piazzolla's huge success in the rest of the world softened opinion at home. Musicians and stage dancers both found the freer rhythms appealing, and with the near disappearance of the social dancers, new tango music in large part followed Piazzolla's lead.

Going underground combined with the eventual invasion of rock-and-roll sent the tango into decline until the mid-1980s when with the fall of the military junta in Argentina in 1983 and the phenomenal success throughout the world of the hit show "Tango Argentino," premiered the same year, tango was thrust back into the spotlight, catching both musicians and dancers unawares. Young people, keen once again to reassert their Argentine-

ness, wanted to learn to dance the tango, and began trying to piece the dance back together as best they could. Dances that had been operating underground came back into the open, and people who hadn't danced for 25 or 30 years gradually began to dance again igniting tango excitement worldwide. In 2009 the tango was declared part of the world's "intangible cultural heritage" by UNESCO.

[sources: Susan Augusta Brown/Christine Denniston, adapted]

THE PERFORMERS

Doug Brown (piano) plays numerous instruments and composes in a wide variety of musical settings and styles. He performs frequently with jazz singer Michelle DuVall, the Madison Symphony, the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra, has toured and recorded with songwriter Ken Lonquist and Gypsy Swing Group Harmonious Wail. Mr. Brown scored the film *Madison*, many plays for American Players Theatre and the Madison Rep, and has played on more than 30 CDs and produced recordings for Bergan Riley, the Last Gaspé and others.

Mark Bridges (cello) is pursuing his doctorate in cello performance at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where he is a student of Uri Vardi. Mr. Bridges earned his Bachelors degree from Boston University as well as a MM and an Orchestral Studies Diploma (as a member of the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra) from the Eastman School of Music. He has performed extensively throughout the United States and Canada and has collaborated with artists from internationally known quartets such as the Borodin, Tokyo and Muir quartets. In addition to performing with Quinteto Yzafa, Mr. Bridges plays with the Dubuque symphony and regularly appears as a performer at Madison's chapter of Classical Revolution. He is an avid cyclist and last year rode three times the distance that he drove. He's fairly proud of this fact.

Amber Dolphin (violin) received a Performer's Certificate (in classical and jazz) in May of 2010 from Northern Illinois University and a MM in 2006 from UW-Madison. Ms. Dolphin is the newly appointed orchestra director at Beloit College and has previously taught at the University of Wisconsin – Platteville. In 2011, Ms. Dolphin co-founded Music con Brio, a non-profit organization that provides music lessons to children after school. Besides teaching there and privately she can be found performing around Madison with the Pecatonica String Quartet and Latin band Charanga Agozá. She traveled to Argentina in the summer of '07 to study tango with some of the great tango violinists in Buenos Aires.

August Jirovec (bass) is a frequent performer with orchestras in the Southern Wisconsin area and beyond, and has appeared on several classical music recordings as a member of the Madison Symphony Orchestra, Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra, and the University of Texas Wind Ensemble. He is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin at Madison (BM, 2001) and the University of Arizona (MM, 2003). Mr. Jirovec is also the principal bassist of the Beloit-Janesville Symphony and coaches bass masterclass for Wisconsin Youth Symphony Orchestra.

Michael O'Brien (bandoneón) has studied the performance, history and composition of tango in Argentina as part of his research toward a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology at the University of Texas. Originally a cellist, he began studying bandoneón in 2006 with Ricardo Fiorio and Fernando Añon Barros. His tango-style compositions for strings have been published by Latham Music and the National Cello Institute. Mr. O'Brien is the composer/ arranger for Quinteto Yzafa.

