Argentinean Choral Music Today

An overview of the springs of innovation and tradition in the creation of repertoire

By Laura Dubinsky, Director of Editions GCC, Argentine Choral Music Publishing House

Three quotations

1. Year: 1934, New York City in an apartment on 48th A 13-year-old Astor Piazzolla plays a tango for Carlos Gardel, whom he just met.

"Hey buddy, you play the bandoneon wonderfully, but you do it like a Galician."

2."You have to leave tango like it is. It is something that is ours; it is like an untamed wilderness. It is set in stone. It is impossible to talk about a new tango. We have to explain to young people that tango does not need new clothing. Tango is the simplest thing, a mere pulsation, it is strength, it is an internal emotion that you bring to the keyboard in order to inspire a response. It is the opposite of pretentiousness.

(Enrique Cadícamo, one of the great poets of tango)

3. Year: 1946, Astor Piazzolla, when serving as director of Francisco Fiorentino's tango orchestra:

“I wrote a beautiful arrangement of a Mariano Mores’ tango. I gave the introduction to a solo cello. It was astonishing. When the ladies who were working there listened to it they started to dance like ballerinas. They gave me a hard time about it, so I took it out. Fiore didn’t like it anyway. I was just tired of it (…) and I left: I started my own orchestra.

Clarifications:

The expression “Play the tango like a Galician” is intended to mean that the interpretation does not suit the style which is considered as genuine for the tango genre, but shows influences from foreign (musical) cultures.

Carlos Gardel, singer and composer. “The Creole Zorzal,” “The Singing Bird of Buenos Aires,” icon and legendary figure of tango in Argentina. He went on to become the greatest tango singer, an untouchable myth among Argentineans. “He sings better and better.”

Astor Piazzolla, bandoneonist, pianist, conductor, composer and arranger. He is not only the most celebrated tango musician in the world but also a composer of classical music. You could say that he pushed the limits of the aesthetics of tango so far that many tango lovers did not have the nerve to accompany him and understand him. His followers, then and now, had the difficult task of distancing themselves from his influences and finding a new way.

(Julio Nudler, www.todotango.com)

I did not include these quotations concerning the history of tango simply to talk about this genre so much at the heart of the culture of the Rio de la Plata (River Plate). Not just

that; for the words (and the accomplishments) of these great tango icons allow us to explore concepts which help to describe choral music from Argentina: tradition, irreverence, mixture of cultures, innovation, resistance, landscape, belonging, remembrance, longing, searching for and arguing about identity …

As a publisher and editor of choral music I have had the opportunity to appreciate a wide array of choral music written by Argentinean composers and arrangers of the last few decades. It is indeed an interesting time in which innovation is crystallized and a new paradigm is created, one where creations develop a new identity – even with profound individual differences and originality – after long years of experimentation with traditional or avant-garde musical tendencies, with just a few exceptions.

The point is that choral music in this part of the world does not have as long a tradition as that of Europe. In addition, regional folk songs are not by nature polyphonic, be it the popular music of today or that of the indigenous peoples who were here before the Spanish conquest. The Vallisto or Mapuche song, just to give an example of people who lived in our territory and had a defined musical identity, or even the ever popular songs in football stadiums, all of them are mainly monodies, or at best of an antiphonal nature. They all have a particular identity regarding rhythm, prosody, poetry etc., but they are not polyphonic as perhaps a spiritual could be.

Hence, we are referring to choral music which was brought to Argentina by Europeans, who also brought with them their languages and their traditions. This was the beginning of the reproduction, recreation, appropriation, fusion and new creation of music spanning several decades, influenced by both Jesuits and native peoples. This music incorporated words, rhythms and instruments of African slaves, mixed with the teachings of Europeans, liturgy, and customs of many different peoples: German, Basque, Jewish, Italian, Welsh … who, guided

by their own traditions, gathered to sing in choirs in libraries, civil institutions, places of worship, and other venues. Any understanding of the development of choral music in Argentina must include an examination of the explosion of choral activities in universities in the 1960s, an unquestionable landmark because of the impulse it gave to the genre from many different points of view: ranging from the sheer number of people involved, to the development of singers and conductors, the beginning of a tradition of concerts, and the emergence of a new repertoire. It is precisely this new body of repertoire that engages our attention at this point.

Choral music slowly became a new, fresh tradition, a mix of complex local cultural experiences, giving rise to a new and special choral movement.

This is easy to understand if we focus on the repertoire based on folk and tango music (e.g.: chacarera, tango, huella, milonga, gato, cueca, triunfo, baguala, chamame, etc) or consider original compositions in which these genres can be traced. And I believe that the imaginary ground where this new music found its roots is well illustrated by the concepts which emerged from those tango citations: tradition, irreverence, mixture of cultures, innovation, resistance, landscape, belonging, remembrance, longing, searching for and arguing about identity …

It would be good to be able to give examples of specific arrangers and composers who clearly exemplify this trend. The scope of this short essay, however, does not allow for such detail. Careful examination of this repertoire will certainly lead the reader on a wonderful road of discovery.

The musical language of tango offers great challenges to choral arrangers. “Performing tangos with the choral instrument presents notable aesthetic and stylistic risks. Ever since choral art began to develop in Argentina (particularly since the middle of the 20th century), choral

arrangers have tried to find the most effective forms of expression for the combination genre-tango/instrument-choir, forms that would be faithful to the style without attracting ridicule." (Javier Zentner)

How have prominent Argentinean choral arrangers solved the tango-choir dilemma (or any other folk genre for that matter)? Issues that concern rhythm and pulse, the poetry and the weight or lightness of the words, the original instrument's color or its sound, the necessary dance that was originally present in the genre, the absent percussion that still sounds even without drumheads or tapings: how have they succeeded in recreating the lyricism and telling a story, and then putting these together in a musical score? I believe that the production of new choral works based on those styles is the natural response to this quest. *It is possible to think that in this "re-creation" for choir, arrangers have taken these genres so far that the resultant work has become much more than a simple arrangement.*

Finally, I wonder if all of this could have happened in a hypothetical country where nobody questioned origins, where everything was homogeneous, where only one of these options was possible: tradition or innovation, where nobody gave a cello solo to a section where the bandoneon "should" be, and where doubt had no chance to exist. Who knows …

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