

Program Notes

CONCERT

Histoire du Tango

ASTOR PIAZZOLLA

Born: 1921

Died: 1992

Composed: 1985

- I. Bordel 1900
- II. Café 1930
- III. Nightclub 1960
- IV. Concert d'aujourd'hui

As a young man, Astor Piazzolla learned to play the bandoneon, the Argentinian accordion-like instrument that uses buttons rather than a keyboard, and he became a virtuoso on it. But his musical path was not at first clear: he gave concerts, made a film soundtrack, and created his own bands before a desire for wider expression drove him to the study of classical music. He received a grant to study with Nadia Boulanger in Paris, and it was that great teacher who advised him to follow his passion for the Argentinian tango as the source for his own music.

Piazzolla returned to Argentina and gradually evolved his own style, one that combines the tango, jazz, and classical music. In his hands, the tango—which had deteriorated into a soft, popular form—was revitalized. Piazzolla transformed this old Argentinian dance into music capable of a variety of expression and fusing sharply-contrasted moods: his tangos are by turn fiery, melancholy, passionate, tense, violent, lyric, and always driven by an endless supply of rhythmic energy.

In the mid-1980s Piazzolla published what has become one of his most popular works, *L'histoire du tango*, a survey of how that form had evolved in four different decades across the twentieth century. Piazzolla originally scored his "History of the Tango" for flute and

guitar as a way of evoking the tango's origins, but this music has been heard in countless arrangements; at this recital it is presented in an arrangement for violin and piano. The opening movement, *Bordel 1900*, reminds us of some of the seamier origins of the form, but the music itself is extroverted and fun—Piazzolla's performance instruction is *Molto giocoso*: "very happy." *Café 1930* shows us the tango as it had become domesticated after several decades—here it functions as comfortable background music while people eat. *Night Club 1960* brings us the tango in transition toward something livelier, as contemporary Latin dance forms began to reinvigorate it. The finale offers a sense of what the tango had become by the end of the twentieth century, assimilating all manner of influences, be they popular dances or classical music.

Program note by Eric Bromberger.

Shaker Loops for String Septet

JOHN ADAMS

Born: 1947

Composed: 1978

- I. Shaking and Trembling
- II. Hymning Slews
- III. Loops and Verses
- IV. A Final Shaking

Shaker Loops began as a string quartet with the title *Wavemaker*. At the time, like many a young composer, I was essentially unaware of the nature of those musical materials I had chosen for my tools. Having experienced a few of the seminal pieces of American Minimalism during the early 1970s, I thought their combination of stripped-down harmonic and rhythmic discourse might be just the ticket for my own unformed yearnings. I gradually developed a scheme for composing that was partly indebted to the repetitive procedures of Minimalism and partly an outgrowth of my interest in waveforms. The "waves" of *Wavemaker* were to be long sequences of oscillating melodic cells that created a rippling,

shimmering complex of patterns like the surface of a slightly agitated pond or lake. But my technique lagged behind my inspiration, and this rippling pond very quickly went dry. Wavemaker crashed and burned at its first performance. The need for a larger, thicker ensemble and for a more flexible, less theory-bound means of composing became very apparent.

Fortunately I had in my students at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music a working laboratory to try out new ideas, and with the original Wavemaker scrapped I worked over the next four months to pick up the pieces and start over. I held on to the idea of the oscillating patterns and made an overall structure that could embrace much more variety and emotional range. Most importantly the quartet became a septet, thereby adding a sonic mass and the potential for more acoustical power. The “loops” idea was a technique from the era of tape music where small lengths of prerecorded tape attached end to end could repeat melodic or rhythmic figures ad infinitum. (Steve Reich’s *It’s Gonna Rain* is the paradigm of this technique.) The Shakers got into the act partly as a pun on the musical term “to shake,” meaning either to make a tremolo with the bow across the string or else to trill rapidly from one note to another.

The flip side of the pun was suggested by my own childhood memories of growing up not far from a defunct Shaker colony near Canterbury, New Hampshire. Although, as has since been pointed out to me, the term “Shaker” itself is derogatory, it nevertheless summons up the vision of these otherwise pious and industrious souls caught up in the ecstatic frenzy of a dance that culminated in an epiphany of physical and spiritual transcendence. This dynamic, almost electrically charged element, so out of place in the orderly mechanistic universe of Minimalism, gave the music its *raison d’être* and ultimately led to the full realization of the piece.

Shaker Loops continues to be one of my most performed pieces. There are partisans who favor the clarity and individualism of the solo septet version, and there are those who prefer the orchestral version for its added density and power. The piece has several times been choreographed and even enjoyed a moment of cult status in the movie *Barfly*, an autobiographical account of the poet Charles Bukowski’s days on LA’s Skid Row. In a famous scene Bukowski (Mickey Rourke), having been battered and bloodied by his drunken girlfriend (Faye Dunaway), holes up in a flophouse room, writing poems in a fit of inspiration to the accompaniment of the insistent buzz of “Shaking and Trembling.”

Program note by John Adams.

Piano Trio No. 1 in B-flat Major, Op. 99, D. 898

FRANZ SCHUBERT

Born: 1797

Died: 1828

Composed: 1827

- I. Allegro moderato
- II. Andante un poco mosso
- III. Scherzo. Allegro
- IV. Rondo. Allegro vivace

Late in his brief life, Franz Schubert wrote two piano trios, a form he had largely ignored up to that point in his career. Perhaps the ready availability of performers like violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, cellist Joseph Linke, and pianist Karl Maria von Bocklet sparked his interest in the form—those performers are known to have performed these trios at the famous “Schubertiads,” those evenings of relaxed and convivial music-making in the homes of Schubert’s friends. But the exact date of composition of the Trio in B-flat Major remains uncertain—the manuscript is lost, and there are almost no references to this music in Schubert’s correspondence. The trio probably dates from the fall of 1827 or early in 1828, the year of Schubert’s death, but it was not

published until 1836, eight years later. At that time Robert Schumann offered a review that gets at the essence of this sunny music: "One glance at it and the troubles of our human existence disappear and the whole world is fresh and bright again. . ." Schumann was right: nearly two centuries later, this music remains an audience favorite.

The Piano Trio in B-flat Major is a big-scaled work: if all the repeats are taken, it can stretch out to over forty minutes. The Allegro moderato is built on two quite different theme-groups. Its opening melody—for violin and cello in octaves—has a jaunty, energetic stride, and Schubert lets it unfold at length before turning it over to the piano as the strings accompany. All this energy falls away as a single sustained note leads to the wistful second subject, for cello alone and marked pianissimo on this first statement. The development is extended, and in its course Schubert presents both themes simultaneously. He teases the audience (and performers!) by seeming to begin the recapitulation in several "wrong" keys before finally settling on the correct B-flat Major.

The Andante un poco mosso features a glowing main theme that in its warm lyricism might almost be called "Brahmsian," were that not absurd; perhaps it does suggest why, half a century later, Brahms held Schubert in such reverence. This lullaby-like idea develops at some length before the piano leads the way into an agitated central episode in C minor. The main theme returns in a luxuriant richness, and once again Schubert leads us through several unexpected keys to the calm conclusion.

The Scherzo, marked Allegro, has a perky energy; by contrast, its trio section is cast as a stately and restrained waltz. The finale is marked "Rondo," but Schubert introduces a terse second idea, stamped out in octaves by all three instruments, and both themes promptly begin to develop—this movement is actually in sonata form. Many have thought the violin's dancing opening melody the essence

of Viennese charm, and certainly it moves with cheerful lightness. Schubert varies the pulse of the movement with an ingenious touch: he re-bars the music from its original 2/4 to 3/2 and combines his principal themes at this relaxed new tempo. It is a wonderful stroke, and it must have appealed to Schubert—he brings it back once again in the closing moments. A propulsive coda drives the trio to its two emphatic closing chords.

Program note by Eric Bromberger.