

MARIA
DE BUENOS AIRES

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Maria's Tango: Rebirth, Redemption and the Eternity in Art

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Renaissance grand maestro Michelangelo's sculptural masterpiece Pietà depicts St. Mary holding the body of Jesus as a pure-looking maiden. Subsequent to the Renaissance, the image of St. Mary has often been appropriated by artists for themes other than Christian theology. The maiden Mary in Pietà is the metonymy of the Virgin Mary, conveying the "purity is beauty" semblance in aesthetics. Raphael was skilled in painting St. Mary and he always presented her as a graceful aristocrat, without the theological sanctity. St. Mary has been largely vulgarised in representation, or even portrayed as nudes, by succeeding artists. Among the more well-known examples is Expressionist painter Edvard Munch's Madonna — a curvaceous naked young woman, sexy yet melancholy. Some suggested that Munch's subject might have been a prostitute whom he considered his muse and thus gave the sacred name. Muse, lust, and holiness have now become a trinity subverting traditional theology that has nevertheless inherited the artistic convention since the Renaissance.

Astor Piazzolla's operetta *María de Buenos Aires* was published in 1968, the most active social movement period in which the entire world was immersed in student movements and counterculture. Piazzolla was a sought-after composer in Argentina at the time. Yet, he didn't earn his international reputation until his world tour a decade later. As an Argentine, Piazzolla's cultural roots had always been in Buenos Aires. Despite Piazzolla's deep influence by European and American literature – he studied classical music and jazz and furthered his studies in Paris, he was essentially what his teacher in Paris, Nadia Boulanger, lamented after listening to him playing the Bandoneon, “This is Astor Piazzolla!” Rather than saying tango was the music genre to which Piazzolla belonged, it would be more accurate to say that tango and its birthplace Buenos Aires were the musician's lifelong motifs in his creations. In this creative context, *María de Buenos Aires* enjoys a unique and irreplaceable status.





Argentine literary giant Jorge Luis Borges once wrote, “Tango originated in bordellos.” While historians may not concur with the statement, the intricacies between prostitutes and the origin of tango are undeniable. It is evident that early tango, be it dance or music, generally paints a picture of underclass hardship in Buenos Aires, unlike the passionate style of the golden age of tango that was approaching globalisation. One of Piazzolla’s best-known works is *Histoire du Tango*, published in 1985. The four movements depict four different historical periods of tango. Incidentally, the first movement is titled “Bordello, 1900”. With *Histoire du Tango*, Piazzolla introduced the literary aspect of Tango to the global music stage in an audience-friendly style. In contrast, in *María de Buenos Aires*, Piazzolla traced the origin of tango culture through the image of Maria, resulting in epoch-making deconstruction and sublimation that subverted the essence of tango.

María de Buenos Aires starts with Maria telling her personal story post-mortem as a spirit. Maria is no longer the mother of Jesus; she leads a unique existence: God was drunk when she was born and thus was cursed for life. She was born on the streets, travelling from the country to Buenos Aires. A punk fell in love with her, but she rejected her flatly for the reason that she doesn't belong to anyone. In the end, she became a prostitute who no one cared about her all the while. Eventually, her body was exposed on the dark streets of capital of tango. When the story reaches this point, Maria seems to be a collective projection of a woman of early tango: in this 19th century South American immigrant port, tango was born out of poverty, betrayal, decadence and death, whereas women were reduced to a target to trifle with. In the 1960s, when Piazzolla conceived this operetta, the audience was intoxicated by the splendid passion of tango in its heyday, nearly forgetting the desolate and gloomy facade of the tango spirit.

This is not the end of Maria's story, however. In the second half of the operetta, Maria's ghost roams around. The procuress and thieves who know her are telling her stories and even prophesying that Maria will be resurrected like Jesus. Here is where Piazzolla's ingenuity comes in: traditionally, male tango dancers take the lead, whereas female dancers just accompany their male partners' movements. However, in Piazzolla's play, Maria, as the female protagonist, becomes the spiritual embodiment of tango. Not only does she symbolise the suffering consciousness of early tango, but she also brings in the themes of "rebirth" and "redemption" from Christianity into the contemporary imagination of tango. In the operetta, Maria remains a virgin even when her body was buried. Her spirit is still wandering the streets of Buenos Aires and yet passing the Way of the Cross of Christ. Towards the operetta's end, three puppets (symbolizing the "Three Magi" at the time of Christ's nativity) come to Maria and tell her about the miracle of her conception. The story follows the nativity of Christ but in the end, Maria gives birth to a baby girl, who is Maria herself.



If Maria is the metaphor of tango, she takes on the mission of Christ's resurrection, while embodying the imagery of St Mary giving birth to the Saviour in a holy immaculate body – this is probably Piazzolla's original idea of tango art. It is said that the idea behind the story came from Piazzolla's lover, Egle Martin, who later left him and married someone else. According to Egle, Piazzolla once said to her husband, "She is music, she can't belong to anybody, no, she is music, she is music, and that's me." Maria can be the projection of Piazzolla's muse (i.e. Egle), as well as the evidence of his devotion to tango. Tango is his salvation, his object of worship, and his domain of self-realisation. One could even say that Maria is Piazzolla's anima, his female self.

Piazzolla has always been known as the innovator of tango and the representative of nuevo tango. Since the 1950s, he had been inspired by his teacher Boulanger and he devoted himself to reforming tango music. His works integrate jazz, classical music and even the twelve-tone equal temperament, elevating his works above the free-spirited passion of traditional tango music with a plaintive depth. Every tango dancer would agree that Piazzolla's works in general are more suitable for pure appreciation than functioning as dance music. During Piazzolla's active creation period, tango culture in Argentina was dying away. On the one hand, the military government imposed cultural control. On the other hand, with the invasion of American popular culture, young people started going to American discos, rather than milongas. Piazzolla's reform of tango music is to make it more refined and presentable for grand occasions. No longer limited to the grassroots culture along streets and alleys, tango music has become elegant music that can be played in concert halls.

María de Buenos Aires was categorised by Piazzolla as “operetta”. The so-called “operetta” is, as it happens, a transitional form of a refined culture getting popularised. A simplified version of “opera”, “operetta” has also become the prototype of “musical” subsequently. The sublime cultural image of “Maria” is Piazzolla’s entry point to explore the cultural heritage of the tango tradition. The result is a refreshing twist, which lets the world understand that tango goes beyond Latin American grassroots culture; it is a music genre comparable to any other forms of great art. If Histoire du Tango was Piazzolla’s tribute to tango tradition, then María de Buenos Aires would be his gift to the future in the form of tango. The fusion and mise en scène of various genres in the work are certainly a more ideal context for different contemporary dance styles, in addition to traditional tango dance. Despite not being as popular as Histoire du Tango, María de Buenos is artistically a stride closer to eternity.



Rehearsal Photos: S2 Production, Worldwide Dancer Project