Astor Piazzolla’s Concierto Para Quinteto: A New Arrangement for Woodwind Quintet

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ASTOR PIAZZOLLA'S CONCIERTO PARA QUINTETO:
A NEW ARRANGEMENT FOR WOODWIND QUINTET

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Musical Examples ........................................................................................................ iv
Abstract ......................................................................................................................................... v

INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER 1 – ASTOR PIAZZOLLA: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SURVEY .................................... 4

CHAPTER 2 – PIAZZOLLA'S MUSICAL STYLE & THE QUINTETO NUEVO TANGO .... 14
  Combining Diverse Influences ................................................................................................. 14
  The Quinteto Nuevo Tango ...................................................................................................... 17

CHAPTER 3 – *CONCIERTO PARA QUINTETO* ........................................................................ 20
  Original Version ...................................................................................................................... 20
  New Arrangement for Woodwind Quintet .............................................................................. 28
  Conclusion .............................................................................................................................. 37

APPENDICES ............................................................................................................................. 39
A. *CONCIERTO PARA QUINTETO* FOR WOODWIND QUINTET ........................................... 39
B. COPYRIGHT PERMISSION LETTER ..................................................................................... 73
REFERENCES .............................................................................................................................. 75
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ........................................................................................................... 76
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Piazzolla’s distinctive 3+3+2 rhythm</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>Concierto para Quinteto</em>, mm. 1-2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><em>Concierto para Quinteto</em>, mm. 7-8</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>Concierto para Quinteto</em>, mm. 13-18</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>Concierto para Quinteto</em>, mm. 32-40</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><em>Concierto para Quinteto</em>, mm. 58-60</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><em>Concierto para Quinteto</em>, mm. 62-79 (reduction)</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><em>Concierto para Quinteto</em>, mm. 82-104 (reduction)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td><em>Concierto para Quinteto</em>, mm. 156-158</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td><em>Concierto para Quinteto</em>, mm. 167-174 (3rd mvt. ground bass motif)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

The music of Argentinian tango composer Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992) is currently enjoying greater worldwide popularity than ever before among musicians and audiences alike. Yet for much of his lifetime Piazzolla had to struggle for acceptance; his idiosyncratic style is the product of many disparate influences, such that he often found it difficult to appeal to the diverse sections of the public he hoped to win over with his music. Piazzolla referred to his own music as nuevo tango, an avant-garde version of Buenos Aires’ most popular dance form. He saw it as a natural evolution of the traditional tango style in which he was well versed, having performed in many of the greatest Buenos Aires tango bands of the 1940s. His detractors among Argentina’s tango traditionalists, however, insisted for years that his more erudite compositions were not even tangos at all.

Certainly, in some ways his music displays a closer kinship with Western classical music. Piazzolla had a lifelong love for the music of J.S. Bach, which he first heard as a child through the wall of his family’s apartment in New York City. Later, as a pupil of Alberto Ginastera and Nadia Boulanger, he also became a devoted scholar and admirer of Stravinsky, Bartók, and Prokofiev, and his own compositions bear the mark of these twentieth-century giants. Another source of inspiration for Piazzolla was jazz: as a young man he would sneak out to Harlem to hear Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway, and his tastes later expanded to include the likes of Gil Evans and Gerry Mulligan.

Piazzolla was able to fuse these various influences—classical, jazz, and tango—into a distinctive musical idiom that, while indebted to other styles, is nonetheless uniquely and unmistakably his own. Initially there was not much public support for this new musical voice, especially in his native Argentina. But through perseverance and relentless self-promotion over the course of a performing career that spanned more than fifty years, Piazzolla was able to increase his fan base from a small but loyal core of devotees into a worldwide following that has only continued to grow since his death. The eclecticism of his source material, once a stumbling block to his critics,
is now a major source of appeal for today’s increasingly diverse cosmopolitan audiences. Piazzolla’s music has been especially embraced in the classical music community, where it has found such distinguished champions as Yo-Yo Ma, Gidon Kremer, and the Kronos Quartet. A growing number of arrangements of his works are being produced for ensembles of various sizes and configurations, so that more musicians can have the pleasure of bringing Piazzolla’s music to an ever-wider public.

The purpose of this treatise is to introduce my new arrangement for woodwind quintet of Piazzolla’s original composition *Concierto para Quinteto*. This piece was premiered in 1971 and was designed to feature the musicians of the Quinteto Nuevo Tango, the most successful of Piazzolla’s groundbreaking ensembles: it is scored for bandoneon, violin, electric guitar, piano, and double bass. It consists of three movements or sections (played *attacca*), and at nine minutes in length it is among his more substantial instrumental pieces. It exhibits all the traits of his mature compositional style, and while Piazzolla wrote this quintet during his most productive and creative period—the late 1960s and early 1970s—it remained in his active performance repertory until the end of his career.

This treatise begins with a brief survey of Piazzolla’s life and career. Full-length scholarly biographies of Piazzolla are widely available, so in keeping with the primary purpose of this treatise and in order to avoid redundancy, the first chapter focuses primarily on those aspects that will provide readers with a grasp of Piazzolla’s musical style and influences, and the trajectory of his creative life. The second chapter features a discussion of the Quinteto Nuevo Tango—its instrumentation, the unique role of each instrument in the group, its importance within the totality of Piazzolla’s oeuvre—an exercise necessary to understand the ensemble for which Piazzolla wrote *Concierto para Quinteto*. The third chapter provides an analytical commentary on Piazzolla’s original version of *Concierto para Quinteto*, dealing with questions of form, harmony, and orchestration, and finishes by offering an in-depth look at my new arrangement, detailing the various challenges and decisions I faced when creating my own adaptation of the piece.
The music of Argentinian tango composer Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992) is currently enjoying greater worldwide popularity than ever before among musicians and audiences alike. Yet while Piazzolla lived to see his art form reach an increasingly enthusiastic global audience before his death in 1992, the larger part of his career can be characterized as one long struggle for acceptance. His idiosyncratic style is the product of many disparate influences, such that he often found it difficult to appeal to the diverse sections of the public he hoped to win over with his music. Piazzolla referred to his own music as nuevo tango, an avant-garde version of Buenos Aires’ most popular dance form. He saw it as a natural evolution and extension of the traditional tango style in which he was well versed, having performed in many of the greatest Buenos Aires tango bands of the 1940s. His detractors among Argentina’s tango traditionalists, however, insisted for years that his more erudite compositions were not even tangos at all.

Certainly, in some ways his music displays a closer kinship with Western classical music. Piazzolla had a lifelong love for the music of J.S. Bach, which he first heard as a child through the wall of his family’s apartment in New York City. Later, as a pupil of Alberto Ginastera and Nadia Boulanger, he also became a devoted scholar and admirer of Stravinsky, Bartók, and Prokofiev, and his own compositions bear the mark of these twentieth-century giants. Another source of inspiration for Piazzolla was jazz: as a young man he would sneak out to Harlem to hear Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway, and his tastes later expanded to include the likes of Gil Evans and Gerry Mulligan.

Piazzolla was able to fuse these various influences—classical, jazz, and tango—into a distinctive musical idiom that, while indebted to other styles, is nonetheless uniquely and unmistakably his own. Initially there was not much public support for this new musical voice, especially in his native Argentina. But through perseverance and relentless self-promotion over the course of a performing career that spanned more than fifty years, Piazzolla was able to increase his
fan base from a small but loyal core of devotees into a worldwide following that has only continued to grow since his death. The eclecticism of his source material, once a stumbling block to his critics, is now a major source of appeal for today’s increasingly diverse cosmopolitan audiences. Piazzolla’s music has been especially embraced in the classical music community, where it has found such distinguished champions as Yo-Yo Ma, Gidon Kremer, and the Kronos Quartet. A growing number of arrangements of his works are being produced for ensembles of various sizes and configurations, so that more musicians can have the pleasure of bringing Piazzolla’s music to an ever-wider public.

The purpose of this treatise is to introduce my new arrangement for woodwind quintet of Piazzolla’s original composition _Concierto para Quinteto_. This piece was premiered in 1971 and was designed to feature the musicians of the Quinteto Nuevo Tango, the most successful of Piazzolla’s groundbreaking ensembles: it is scored for bandoneon, violin, electric guitar, piano, and double bass. It consists of three movements or sections (played _attaca_), and at nine minutes in length it is among his more substantial instrumental pieces. It exhibits all the traits of his mature compositional style, and while Piazzolla wrote this quintet during his most productive and creative period—the late 1960s and early 1970s—it remained in his active performance repertory until the end of his career.

This treatise begins with a brief survey of Piazzolla’s life and career. Full-length scholarly biographies of Piazzolla are widely available, so in keeping with the primary purpose of this treatise and in order to avoid redundancy, the first chapter focuses primarily on those aspects that will provide readers with a grasp of Piazzolla’s musical style and influences, and the trajectory of his creative life. The second chapter features a discussion of the Quinteto Nuevo Tango—its instrumentation, the unique role of each instrument in the group, its importance within the totality of Piazzolla’s oeuvre—an exercise necessary to understand the ensemble for which Piazzolla wrote _Concierto para Quinteto_. The third chapter provides an analytical commentary on Piazzolla’s original version of _Concierto para Quinteto_, dealing with questions of form, harmony, and orchestration, and
finishes by offering an in-depth look at my new arrangement, detailing the various challenges and
decisions I faced when creating my own adaptation of the piece.
CHAPTER 1

ASTOR PIAZZOLLA: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SURVEY

Astor Pantaleón Piazzolla was born in 1921 in Mar del Plata, Argentina, a small resort town about 250 miles south of Buenos Aires. An only child, his parents were Vicente “Nonino” Piazzolla and Asunta Manetti, themselves the children of Italian immigrants. In 1925, when Astor was four, the family moved to New York City in search of greater economic opportunity. With the exception of a brief nine-month return to Argentina, they lived on the Lower East Side until 1937. Growing up in the diverse and exciting environment of New York City in the 1920s and 30s provided the young Piazzolla with a wealth of personal and musical experiences that were to prove vital to his future career in music.

Piazzolla was a pugnacious, troublemaking youth. He was born with a badly deformed right leg; and while the problem was largely corrected through surgery while he was still a baby, for the rest of his life his right leg was thinner and slightly shorter than his left. As a young man, this condition made Piazzolla self-conscious and eager to prove himself: “I was very short, and perhaps because of it and the problem with my leg … I wanted to excel. It was me against the world … what others didn’t dare do, I tried.”

Streetwise from an early age, he was a member of several gangs growing up, frequently got in fights, and had some minor brushes with the law. Even after he shed his youthful lawlessness, his music retained a hard-edged toughness.

Piazzolla’s father bought him his first bandoneon (a button squeezebox, related but not identical to the accordion, and the iconic instrument of the tango) when he was eight years old. 

Vicente Piazzolla was a great lover of the tango and wanted nothing more than for his son to share

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that love, but at first the boy wasn’t interested. He took music lessons with several different teachers
in the neighborhood, but didn’t apply himself and made little progress, preferring to spend his time
playing baseball or boxing with his friends. His earliest memorable musical experiences were
sneaking out to the Cotton Club in Harlem to listen to Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway. These
encounters formed the basis for a lifelong love of jazz, which influenced Piazzolla’s own creative
work in several important ways. Another early influence was the Klezmer music he heard at Jewish
weddings in his neighborhood. Piazzolla later claimed the distinctive 3+3+2 rhythmic accents that
permeate his music were borrowed from the Jewish folk idioms he absorbed as a child.

However, it was when he first heard the works of J.S. Bach that Piazzolla began to take
music seriously. Azzi and Collier, in their biography of Piazzolla, describe this defining encounter:

The Piazzollas’ next-door neighbor on East 9th Street was Bela Wilda, a Hungarian pianist
and pupil of Sergei Rachmaninov. Astor was mesmerized by the sound of Wilda’s piano as
he practiced, and he began staying at home simply to listen. He became obsessed by Wilda’s
playing of Bach (“I fell in love with Bach, I went crazy,” he would say later) and quickly
decided he wanted to study with Wilda. Vicente finally gave in. Wilda had no knowledge of
the bandoneon but could arrange piano pieces for the instrument. More important, he
introduced Astor to classical music, which soon seemed as alluring as jazz … Astor was to
regard him as his “first great master” … Wilda’s example clinched Astor’s desire to be a
musician.

A third important meeting that marked young Piazzolla’s early musical life in New York was
with the legendary Argentinian tango singer Carlos Gardel. Latin America’s first true international
superstar, Gardel was in New York from 1934-35 starring in a series of films by Paramount.
Expatriates have a way of finding each other in foreign lands, and Gardel made the acquaintance of
the Piazzolla family during his stay in New York. Astor was thirteen at the time, and found himself
serving regularly as the star’s guide and translator. Gardel also made use of Astor’s musical talent,

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3 Ibid, 8-9, 12-13.
4 Gorin, 30.
5 Azzi & Collier, 13-14.
allowing the boy to accompany him on his bandoneon when he performed at dinner parties and even giving him a small cameo role in one of his films. The occasions when he accompanied Gardel were some of Piazzolla’s earliest performing experiences, and served to encourage him on his journey to becoming a professional musician. And although it wasn’t until later that he truly began to be enamored of the tango, the encounter with Gardel helped to establish his credentials as a tanguero, and no doubt planted a seed that would eventually blossom spectacularly.

The Piazzolla family returned to Argentina in 1937. It was during his first listless days back in Mar del Plata that the teenaged Piazzolla began to fall in love with the tango music he heard played incessantly on the radio—it was the golden age of the tango, the height of its popularity. He started to play his bandoneon in local tango bands, or orquestas típicas. In 1939 at the age of eighteen, Piazzolla moved to Buenos Aires to join the tango scene there. He idolized the Aníbal Troilo Orchestra, widely regarded as the greatest of the golden age orquestas típicas, and got the chance to audition for the bandleader when one of Troilo’s regular bandoneon players suddenly fell ill. Impressed, Troilo invited Piazzolla to join the group as a regular. His experience in Troilo’s orchestra served as his apprenticeship in the traditional tango style. Piazzolla later reminisced about his time with Troilo:

When I joined Troilo I tried to imitate many of his things … I learned the tricks of the tangueros, those intuitive tricks that helped me later on. I couldn’t define them technically; they are forms of playing, forms of feeling; it’s something that comes from inside, spontaneously. At the outset I was just one of the bandoneons Troilo had in the orchestra, but I wanted to be number one, and I got there.

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6 Ibid, 15-16.

7 Tanguero: “A person from the particular culture of the tango’s adherents and fans, with its distinctive ways of feeling and behaving.” Ibid, 292.

8 Ibid, 19-22.

9 Ibid. 22-26, 30-32.
In addition to his work with Troilo, Piazzolla also wanted to continue the serious study of
classical music that he had begun with Bela Wilda back in New York. In 1940, learning that Arthur
Rubinstein was visiting Buenos Aires, Piazzolla introduced himself to the famous pianist and
expressed his desire to study. With Rubinstein’s recommendation, he began private lessons with the
Argentinian composer Alberto Ginastera (he was Ginastera’s first pupil). With Ginastera he
developed a firm grasp of counterpoint, orchestration, and harmony. He was also encouraged by his
teacher to broaden his interests and become better acquainted with other facets of culture, such as
literature and painting.10

Over time, Piazzolla began to grow disaffected with the nightclub milieu where the tango
world existed and the simplistic, crowd-pleasing nature of the music performed there. His classical
training and technical skill set him apart from the other musicians in the dance band scene. At this
time, Piazzolla had not yet started composing music of his own, but the arrangements he had begun
contributing to Troilo’s repertoire grew increasingly complex and challenging, incorporating
harmonies and counterpoint learned from analyzing Bartók, Stravinsky, and Prokofiev scores in his
sessions with Ginastera. It came to be too much for Troilo, a popular artist who wanted his music to
remain accessible and danceable.11

Piazzolla quit Troilo’s band and struck out on his own, forming his own orchestra in 1946.
They played Piazzolla’s own edgy arrangements of conventional tango repertory as well as a few
songs of his own devising. He longed to make a radical break from the conservatism of traditional
tango, but the dancing public was not interested in his experiments and he was forced to dissolve

10 Gorin, 72-73.

the group in 1949. Resolving to quit the tango scene entirely, Piazzolla began composing his own classical music around this time. He wrote film scores and arrangements in order to make a living, and in his spare time devoted himself to composing what he called “erudite music.” Finally he had some success when his three-movement symphonic work, *Buenos Aires, op. 15* won the Fabien Sevitzky Prize in 1953.

The prize money enabled Piazzolla to travel to Paris the following year and study composition with Nadia Boulanger. His sessions with Boulanger proved to be a crucial turning point in his career, although not in the way he originally expected. Piazzolla was fond of telling the story of how Boulanger helped him to find his voice as a composer:

I arrived at Nadia’s house with a suitcase full of scores, the complete classical oeuvre I had written to that point. Nadia spent the first two weeks analyzing the work. “To teach you,” she said, “I first must know where your music is going.”

One day, finally, she told me that everything I had brought with me was well written but that she could not find the spirit in it. She asked me what music I played in my country, what I wanted to do. I had not told her about my past as a tango musician…

I thought to myself: if I tell her the truth she will throw me out the window … By then she was already considered the best teacher in the music world. I was a simple *tanguero*. But after two days I had to tell her the truth. I told her about Aníbal Troilo, about my own orchestra, and how, tired of all that, I thought my future was in classical music.

Nadia looked into my eyes and asked me to play one of my tangos at the piano … When I finished, Nadia took my hands in hers and with that English of hers, so sweet, she said, “Astor, this is beautiful. I like it a lot. Here is the true Piazzolla—do not ever leave him.” It was the great revelation of my musical life.”

Encouraged by Boulanger’s validation, Piazzolla’s resolution from that moment was to work to elevate the tango world through his music rather than seek to join the classical establishment.

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12 Ibid, 37-41.
13 Ibid, 49.
14 Gorin, 70-71.
Another encounter that occurred during his time in Paris provided him with the initial direction for his tango revolution. One night a friend took him to a performance by a jazz octet led by the American saxophonist Gerry Mulligan. Piazzolla was impressed by the joyful attitude of the performers, and by the artful balance they found between respect for musical structure and improvisational freedom. He asked his friend, “Why not something similar for the tango, a tango octet, perhaps?”

Energized with a new sense of purpose, Piazzolla returned to Buenos Aires in April of 1955 and immediately formed the Octeto Buenos Aires with the express intention of revolutionizing the tango genre, of creating a new avant-garde approach to the music. Although they played tangos, this was emphatically not a dance band, as Piazzolla took great care to point out—this was music meant for considered listening, an intimate music-making experience more akin to chamber music in terms of sophistication. The Octeto’s instrumentation was considerably pared-down from the traditional orquestas típicas, featuring two bandoneons and two violins (rather than the usual four), cello, bass, and piano. Piazzolla also included an electric guitar in the lineup of the Octeto; he was the first to use the instrument in tango music, and it was a staple of virtually every ensemble he headlined for the rest of his career. Piazzolla’s biographers Azzi and Collier described the unique sound of the new group:

For the first time, Piazzolla treated all his musicians as solo instrumentalists. He allowed the electric guitar a high degree of improvisation, something totally unknown in previous tango music. The piano’s free-flowing role, the counterpoint achieved with the strings, the percussive effects created by the strings and electric guitar, and the neatly calculated dissonances, gave the ensemble a revolutionary sound.

On account of the avant-garde character of the music (and, no doubt, Piazzolla’s inflammatory self-promotional rhetoric) the new ensemble drew the fierce ire of tango

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15 Azzi & Collier, 55.
16 Ibid, 59.
Before Piazzolla, no one in Argentina had considered the tango art music to sit and appreciate; it was meant exclusively for dancing, and as such many refused to recognize Piazzolla’s pieces as tangos at all. The dislike for Piazzolla and the Octeto from certain quarters was so intense that some band members even received death threats. On the other hand, Piazzolla’s *nuevo tango* received some support from the younger, more adventurous generation of Argentinian music lovers. The nation’s jazz enthusiasts also appreciated it, recognizing in Piazzolla a kindred spirit. But it wasn’t enough: the dancing public was still the mainstay of the tango musician’s audience, and without the support of that key demographic there were not enough gigs to keep the Octeto Buenos Aires going. His finances in disarray, Piazzolla was forced to disband the group in 1958.\(^{17}\)

Hoping that American audiences would have fewer entrenched prejudices than Argentinians, Piazzolla relocated with his family to New York City. But professional success eluded him there too: at that time, the American public was simply not interested in his music. Defeated, Piazzolla returned to Argentina once more in 1960. Fortunately for him, political and cultural changes in early 1960s Argentina meant that there was now a greater openness to novel forms of cultural expression. Thanks to television and radio appearances, coupled with frequent engagements at progressive new musical nightspots, Piazzolla was able to find more support for his nuevo tango than he had in the 1950s, although he remained a controversial figure.\(^{18}\)

Much of the credit for Piazzolla’s increased success during this time can be attributed to the new ensemble that he pioneered in the 1960s and early 1970s: the Quinteto Nuevo Tango. Its instrumentation consisted of bandoneon, violin, piano, electric guitar, and double bass. This smaller lineup was a more financially viable model for Piazzolla than some of his larger ensemble ventures that, while artistically successful, inevitably left him broke. With the Quinteto he was able to tour

\(^{17}\) Ibid, 59-65.

\(^{18}\) Ibid, 78-80.
widely both at home and abroad. Artistically speaking, Piazzolla’s writing for the Quinteto was particularly inspired and memorable, and the 1960s were also his most prolific years as a composer.\textsuperscript{19}

In 1968, Piazzolla collaborated with the poet Horacio Ferrer and singer Amelita Baltar on an operatic project (Piazzolla called it an “operita”) entitled \textit{María de Buenos Aires}. The work had two sung roles (one male and one female), a narrator, and a ten-piece orchestra consisting of the Quinteto Nuevo Tango augmented with additional strings and percussion. His association with Ferrer and Baltar continued into the early 1970s and generated a string of hit songs, such as \textit{Balada para un loco} and \textit{Balada para mi muerte}. Invigorated by the experience of working with a larger ensemble, Piazzolla decided in 1971 to expand the Quinteto into a nonet that he called Conjunto 9. He later regarded his work with Conjunto 9 as some of the finest of his career; together they embarked on a critically and popularly acclaimed tour of South America and Europe, funded by a grant from the Municipality of Buenos Aires. Unfortunately it did not last long, for the municipality was unable to renew their contract on account of the political upheaval Argentina was experiencing at the time. For a short while, Piazzolla was able to fall back on the Quinteto, but the financial losses he suffered in mounting these large-scale projects left him in dire straits.\textsuperscript{20}

Piazzolla’s financial woes, combined with various difficulties in his personal life and his exhausting work schedule, led to an acute crisis of health when he suffered a heart attack in October 1973. Upon his recovery, feeling the need for a fresh start, Piazzolla decided to dissolve the Quinteto and move to Europe. The decision was made in part because of the encouraging response he had had from European audiences while touring with Conjunto 9, but also to escape from the political turmoil in Argentina and the persistent controversy he and his music continued to provoke amongst his compatriots.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 81-91.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, 122-127.
The choice to relocate to Europe turned out to be a good one from a business perspective. From 1974 to 1977, using first Rome and then Paris as a home base, Piazzolla toured throughout Europe and recorded a series of successful albums. To maximize profits, he performed and recorded with ad hoc studio ensembles rather than forming a permanent group of his own. This decision, along with the fact that he deliberately tried to tailor the music to European popular tastes, resulted in a less distinctive sound that has not aged nearly as well as most of his other work. As the pianist, conductor, and composer Lalo Schifrin once remarked: “[Piazzolla was] a universal musician who needed to focus on the language of Buenos Aires; the more local he was, the more universal he became.”

Later in life, Piazzolla himself admitted that the music of his European phase had less artistic integrity than some of his other ventures: “Not everything I did in Europe is of the same quality. The pieces I wrote for Libertango, Piazzolla ’77, and Piazzolla ’78 [titles of his European albums] are silly next to the music I wrote for María de Buenos Aires, the Nonet…”

In 1976 Piazzolla formed perhaps his most experimental group, the Electronic Octet. Its instrumentation included Piazzolla's bandoneon, violin, piano, electric guitar, electric organ, electric bass, synthesizers, and percussion. The Electronic Octet was a definite step in the direction of the jazz-rock fusion that was popular at the time. While the group generated critical acclaim and became very popular, especially among young audiences, Piazzolla had misgivings about the artistic direction his music was taking and he dissolved the Electronic Octet in 1977. He felt that this “electronic phase” was incongruous with the development of his music up to that point and that he was straying too far from his roots.

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22 Gorin, 51-52.
23 Gorin, 82-83.
By 1978, having improved his financial situation and established a vibrant European fan base, Piazzolla felt he could afford to return to his homeland and more artistically rewarding pursuits. He decided to revive the Quinteto Nuevo Tango. Circumstances required him to find new personnel, but he already had a wealth of repertoire from the group’s previous run in the 1960s and early 70s, to which he was eager to add. Nearly the entire decade from 1978 to 1988 was occupied by constant touring and recording with the Quinteto, to increasing acclaim, both at home and abroad. Impressed by Piazzolla’s growing international following, even the long-skeptical Argentinian public began to recognize his music as a national treasure.

In the mid to late 1980s, Piazzolla began to compose classical symphonic music and chamber music again, something he had not attempted much since his studies with Boulanger in the 1950s, writing two concertos for bandoneon and orchestra and two short original pieces for the Kronos Quartet. In August of 1990, he was busy with a new ensemble venture—a sextet—when he suffered a grievous cerebral hemorrhage that brought his career to a sudden, tragic end. Severely disabled, he lingered on in the hospital for almost two years before finally passing away on July 4, 1992.
CHAPTER 2

PIAZZOLLA’S MUSICAL STYLE & THE QUINTETO NUEVO TANGO

Combining Diverse Influences

There are several influences that made their mark on Piazzolla’s music: the Western classical tradition, from J.S. Bach to Stravinsky; the Harlem jazz of Duke Ellington and the “cool” jazz of Gerry Mulligan and Gil Evans; and, of course, the tango tradition of Buenos Aires, most notably golden-age bandleaders such as Aníbal Troilo. In terms of harmony and melody, Piazzolla’s music generally utilizes a functional tonal structure, notwithstanding a few forays into free atonality and polytonality. His more lyrical phrases betray a warm, operatic lyricism comparable to a figure like Puccini (perhaps an expression of his Italian heritage?). He frequently employed extended harmonies to achieve a lush chordal texture, a procedure that belies the influence of the jazz tradition, or perhaps French impressionism.24

Another of his music’s defining traits (and one of the qualities that made it so controversial to conservative tango audiences) is his free treatment of dissonance. In this context he can be compared to his idols Stravinsky and Bartók, who while they sometimes utilized broadly tonal structures, saw no need to resolve the dissonances their counterpoint often generated. It is impossible to listen to Piazzolla without hearing the contrapuntal legacy of J.S. Bach, whose music he so admired from an early age. Piazzolla’s own works are replete with contrapuntal devices: he was especially fond of fugal procedures (which he used to great effect in such works as La Muerte del Ángel and Calambre) and ground bass technique, which, as we shall see, he utilized in both the outer movements of Concierto para Quinteto.

24 Azzi & Collier, 158, 160.
Piazzolla’s approach to rhythm also deserves special mention. The tango is a dance in $\frac{4}{4}$ time, and most of Piazzolla’s pieces are no exception; but he added an extra layer of interest in the way he constantly shifted the arrangement of the accents within each bar, changing which eighth notes received the most emphasis. The pervasive syncopation in his rhythmic writing gives his phrases a jagged edge—a sense of toughness, *machismo*. We have already made mention of the 3+3+2 pattern he so often used, which he claimed to have borrowed from the music he heard played at Jewish weddings in his childhood neighborhood on New York City’s Lower East Side.

![Example 1: Piazzolla’s distinctive 3+3+2 rhythm](image)

Piazzolla’s biographers Azzi and Collier point out that this rhythm does indeed appear often in the Yiddish folk music traditions of Central and Eastern Europe, and that it is also found extensively in the music of Bartók. This connection could have provided an additional path for this particular rhythm to enter Piazzolla’s consciousness through his extensive study of Bartók’s works during his student days with Ginastera.\(^{25}\)

Besides certain aspects of his harmonic vocabulary, an additional concept that Piazzolla adapted from jazz was his notion of improvisation. He appreciated the freedom that improvisation gave to great jazz musicians, but he realized that his music was too formally complex and contrapuntally-oriented to allow for that kind of improvisation in his own pieces: “In my music there isn't a harmonic scheme that repeats itself every twelve bars, but there is perpetual change.”\(^{26}\) Instead, he explained, “I give the parts to the violinist … It's written down—C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C–

\(^{25}\) Ibid, 159.

\(^{26}\) Ibid, 172.
–but I tell him to play it as he feels it.” 27 Practically speaking, this meant that in Piazzolla’s ensembles there was always a great deal of improvised ornamentation and extemporaneous tempo rubato phrasing in the solo melodic lines. This is one of the great challenges for the performer or arranger of Piazzolla’s music, who often must look beyond the written score to grasp the finer points of his personal style.

With all these influences from other musical traditions, how was Piazzolla able to retain his own distinct identity as a tango musician? According to Azzi and Collier, it was through his unwavering dedication to the canyengue soul of the tango:

[Canyengue] refers to the sensual and provocative way of walking and dancing which ill-fitting shoes gave the compadritos, the street toughs who invented the tango in the 1880s in the poorer southern districts of Buenos Aires. The modest social background and the knife fights in which the compadritos were frequently involved are often seen as the bedrock from which the authentic tango character springs; the authentic tango spirit must always express the noble qualities of mingre (muck) and niña or camorra (fighting, or the propensity to fight). The tango is defiant and exhibitionistic. The canyengue character gives the tango a provocative inflection. 28

It was Piazzolla’s particular genius that he was able to synthesize the disparate influences that comprised his music into a surprisingly organic whole. The provocative dissonance; the nervous syncopation; the space he left for melodic and rhythmic freedom; the harmonic richness of his soundscape—all these qualities in his music always served to convey the tango’s essential canyengue spirit.

27 Ibid, 159.

28 Ibid, 161-162.
The Quinteto Nuevo Tango

‘The **Quintet has two lives. One is born in the 1960s; the other, with a completely different lineup, in 1978. The first communicated a music at times aggressive, at times melodic. The second one offered something better prepared, perhaps more intellectual.**’ – Astor Piazzolla

Of all the ensembles he fronted during his long career, the Quinteto Nuevo Tango proved to be the group best capable of transmitting Piazzolla’s musical vision. It was with the first incarnation of this ensemble that he first gained ground with his tango revolution in the 1960s, and with its second incarnation that he won over the world in the 1980s. Many of Piazzolla’s most memorable pieces were either written for the Quinteto (the *Ángel* series, *La Camorra*, *Escualo*, and many more) or were arranged by him from earlier efforts, and exist in their definitive versions for that ensemble (*Adiós Nonino* being the most famous example). Piazzolla described his approach to writing for the Quinteto Nuevo Tango, the challenges and advantages of using that particular instrumentation, and how composing for a smaller ensemble forced him to be economical:

> [The Quintet represents] a balanced reduction of the large orchestra. The violin represents the strings; the bandoneon is perhaps the woodwinds; the guitar, piano, and double bass take turns in providing the rhythmic part. But it seems to me much more difficult to write for a quintet than for a big orchestra; there are only five instruments, five voices from which everything has to be heard. The counterpoint has to be extremely clear, because I don’t only work in harmonic blocks. I work contrapuntally, and I always try to learn more so as to enjoy myself more—writing fugues for quintet, always with my sort of rhythms. The fact that I don’t have percussion, too, forces me to evolve; I have to *invent* my percussion with the violin, the bandoneon, the guitar.  

The issues Piazzolla mentions here are also of some import to anyone seeking to create new arrangements of his music. It is also important to note the roles he assigns to the various instruments in the Quinteto. The violin and bandoneon are the primary solo voices, performing the bulk of the melodic material. The double bass anchors the ensemble and provides the bass lines,

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29 Gorin, 51.
30 Azzi & Collier, 205-206.
often supported by the left hand notes in the piano part to add depth and color. The piano and electric guitar serve primarily as inner voices, defining the harmonies, filling out the texture, and articulating many of the music’s distinctive rhythmic features. Obviously, these roles were not set in stone—every musician in Piazzolla’s groups was given opportunities to shine as a soloist—but as a generalization they are true enough, and useful for the arranger to keep in mind when deciding how to set Piazzolla’s music for different instrumental combinations.

Piazzolla also took care to highlight the individual strengths of the musicians who played in his ensembles, and a recording of the same piece by the second Quinteto will often sound startlingly different from a performance by the first Quinteto due to the personnel differences between the two groups. In the first Quinteto, although the personnel fluctuated somewhat in the years between 1960 and 1974, a few established themselves as regulars. Violinist Antonio Agri came from a classical background, having been recruited by Piazzolla from the Rosario Symphony. His sound had a vintage quality, with a bright tone, fast vibrato, and an unabashedly romantic sense of lyricism. He modeled his tango style on that of Elvino Vardaro, violinist and leader of one of the great golden-age orquestas típicas, who was also one of Piazzolla’s musical idols.31 The pianists Osvaldo Manzi and Jaime “El Ruso” Gosis were veterans of Buenos Aires tango bands before joining Piazzolla’s group. Gosis in particular was considered a master of the tango style; of him Piazzolla said, “there never was and never will be anyone with Gosis’s touch.”32 Horacio Malvicino and Oscar López-Ruiz were successful jazz guitarists, and the only members of the first Quinteto who also played with the second. Bassist Enrique “Kicho” Díaz, another tango veteran (he had played with Piazzolla in

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31 Ibid, 81.

32 Gorin, 80.
Troilo’s band), was renowned for his rock-steady sense of tempo. “I think he is the father of all bass players,” said Piazzolla. “He was a sort of elephant carrying the whole quintet on his back.”

The second Quinteto, which was together from 1978-1988, was much more consistent in terms of personnel. Its violinist was Fernando Suárez Paz: his tone was darker and huskier than Agri’s, and he was a master of the kind of tango improvisation that Piazzolla valued in his players. Pablo Ziegler was the pianist, a jazz player who one critic likened to “a Latin Bill Evans.” Compared with that of Gosis or Manzi, his was a more aggressive, more percussive style of playing, which gave the group an edgier sound. The bassist was Héctor Console; Azzi and Collier contrasted him with Díaz, in that “Console was more fluid, able to achieve astonishingly subtle rhythmic variations, especially in the slower sections of Piazzolla’s pieces.” In fact, the fluidity they attribute to Console is indicative of the second Quinteto as a whole: whereas the first group communicated more of a chamber music sensibility, the second had something of the sound of a finely tuned modern jazz ensemble. Again, it is important for the arranger of Piazzolla’s music to be aware of the differences in interpretation that occur between the first and the second Quinteto when deciding how to notate the finer points of the music in the new arrangement—especially in regard to things like tempo markings, articulation, and ornamentation.

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33  Ibid, 81.
34  Azzi & Collier, 259.
CHAPTER 3

CONCIERTO PARA QUINTETO

Original Version

*Concierto para Quinteto* consists of three contrasting movements or sections in the traditional concerto form (fast-slow-fast). In performance, the movements are played *attacca*, so as to give the impression of a single uninterrupted work. In one sense, the first movement (mm. 1-79) has the tentative character of a prelude. The first 44 bars utilize a ground bass procedure in C♯ minor. Its most fundamental unit is a descending diatonic scale in quarter notes that is introduced at the start of the piece in the double bass and piano left hand (Piazzolla’s characteristic bass doubling).

Example 2: *Concierto para Quinteto*, mm. 1-2

This unit introduces the motivic idea of the octave descent, which will play a significant role in long-range voice leading later in the piece. The unit is repeated three times, and then the tonic pitch is sustained for two bars, forming an eight-bar ground bass pattern. The constant reiteration of this pattern precludes any real harmonic development or large-scale formal divisions, creating a sense of stasis, an anticipatory feeling that the main event is yet to come. A short turnaround figure

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36 My commentary is based on the score published by Tonos Music, from which all the musical examples are derived: Astor Piazzolla, *Concierto para Quinteto* (Darmstadt, Germany: Tonos, 2005). For the sake of a cleaner presentation, I have elected to retype all musical examples.
at the end of each iteration (see Example 4 below, mm. 15-16) hints at V-I tonal motion, but it is too brief to be interpreted as a substantial departure from the tonic key area.

And yet, in spite of this apparent regularity, Piazzolla constantly works to undermine the stability of the tonic harmony and thwart our expectations of tonal regularity. An interesting event occurs in mm. 7-8, right at the beginning of the work, that establishes this subversive attitude: minor triads, their roots a minor third apart, stack to create a cluster of tritones.

Example 3: *Concierto para Quinteto*, mm. 7-8

This is more than just an eerie novelty sound effect—it is a declaration of intent, for the interval of the tritone will recur at significant structural junctures throughout the piece, and always in ways that subvert the tonality. Indeed, in the following measures (mm. 9-16) $G^\#$ is a prominent melodic tone heard in the guitar and bandoneon, set against the insistent $C^\#$ minor tonic chord.
(with A as an added sixth, a common procedure in jazz harmony) in the piano and bass. The resulting clash between the G♮, the G♯, and the A is an example of the provocative dissonance for which Piazzolla was notorious.

Example 4: *Concierto para Quinteto*, mm. 13-18

In the next passage (mm. 17-31) the tritones disappear for a while, but an increased level of syncopation keeps the tension mounting: Piazzolla’s ubiquitous 3+3+2 rhythm—articulated by the bandoneon and guitar in counterpoint—competes with a different rhythmic ostinato in the violin and piano, all set against the regular quarter note pulse in the bass line. We also begin to see other trickery at the phrase rhythm level: there is a short phrase extension in m. 25, with an interpolated \(\frac{3}{4}\) bar prolonging the turnaround figure that was introduced in mm. 15-16. Then an abrupt change of texture occurs in mm. 32-40, coinciding with a variation of the ground bass procedure: the fundamental ground bass unit is expressed in whole notes instead of quarter notes, stretching the duration of the unit from two bars to eight bars while preserving its essentially tonic harmonic function. At the same time the piano right hand iterates the open fifth that forms the shell of the
tonic triad, while the bandoneon, guitar, and violin *pizzicato* play a tortuous unison melody derived from the turnaround figure. This passage can be interpreted as a second (and more drastic) extension of the turnaround, with the slower bass rhythm serving to heighten the harmonic stasis that characterizes the first movement as a whole.

Example 5: *Concierto para Quinteto*, mm. 32-40

The next four bars (mm. 41-44) hint at a recapitulation of the opening material, with the return of the ground bass pattern in its original quarter note form and a melody reminiscent of mm. 9-12, but the association proves ephemeral. Instead, the pattern is broken halfway and we hear an energetic new contrapuntal section featuring a descending fifth sequence (mm. 45-61), the first instance of any kind harmonic event other than the tonic prolongation that has thus far been so prevalent. This is the climax of the first movement, but in m. 59 where we anticipate a definitive authentic cadence in C♯ minor, our expectations are shattered by a jarring dissonance: we are given a c♯º7 chord instead, the inherent tritones highlighted with aggressive accents, and the tonality completely collapses.
The following section (mm. 62-79), which ends the first movement, is transitional in nature: the violin takes center stage with a warmly lyrical melody, anticipating the mood of the second movement and providing sudden relief from the grating dissonance of the previous bars. The melody traverses an octave descent from E₅ to E₄, a subtle motivic link to the now-absent ground bass figure, albeit in a different tonal context (more will be made of this connection in the second movement).³⁷

³⁷ For all pitch designations in this treatise, I will use the Acoustical Society of America’s scientific pitch notation (C₄ = middle C; C₅ = the octave above, etc.).
The tonal center here is tenuous: the $c^\#_7$ chord that caused the collapse of the $C^\#$ minor tonality resolves to $d^\#_7$, and we are led through another sequence that suggests first $E$ minor, then $D$ minor and $C$ major as possible points of reference, before finally coming to rest on a half cadence in $A$ minor in m. 79.

The second movement (mm. 80-158) is the most tonally ambiguous part of the piece. It vacillates between $A$ minor, where the first movement left off, and $E^\#$ major: once again we have the interval of the tritone rearing its head, this time at the level of large-scale tonal relationships. It can be broadly divided into three sections (ABA), each utilizing the same thematic material, only in different tonal and instrumental contexts. Here Piazzolla largely eschews the polyphonic textures that dominated the first movement in favor of a more homophonic, soloist-oriented approach.

![Example 8: Concierto para Quinteto, mm. 82-104 (reduction)](image)

The first “A” section (mm. 80-107) is an expansive bandoneon solo. In performance Piazzolla took considerable improvisational liberty with this passage, but by examining the “skeletal” version of the melody that is printed in the score we can see that it is based on an initial ascent to $G_5$, followed by a drawn-out descent to $G_4$. Here we have another instance of the octave descent motive occurring on a larger scale, at the level of long-range voice leading. This descent is harmonized by a linear intervallic pattern that expands the minor third formed between the soprano
and bass voices in m. 88 to a major third in m. 104, corresponding with the tonal shift from A minor to E♭ major. The middle voices complicate matters somewhat, for Piazzolla has them swapping out chord tones for dissonant intervals like seconds and fourths, giving what otherwise might have been a fairly pedestrian sequential pattern a certain harsh pungency. So too with the intervallic pattern itself: any time we begin to feel a hint of tonal stability, one of the pitches will be altered to form a diminished fifth between the soprano and bass voices, continuing to drive the descent towards its goal in m. 104.

The “B” section (mm. 108-131), which highlights the violin, is constructed very much like the “A” section except that it begins in C minor instead of A minor (although both end up in E♭ major), and features an abridged descent from B♭₆ to B♭₄. While there is V-I bass motion in E♭ major at the end of the “B” section (mm. 129-131), the third of the E♭ chord is conspicuously absent, having been replaced with A♭, diminishing the sense of tonal closure. Then in the following bar there is a sudden shift back to A minor for a reprise of the “A” section (mm. 132-158), which in terms of harmony and voice leading is nearly identical to the first “A” section. However, the orchestration is different this time: the bandoneon and violin play a simpler version of the melody in unison without ornamentation, while the piano and guitar interject with sharply accented gestures, often clashing harmonically with the linear intervallic pattern outlined by the melody and bass voices.

This disagreement between the outer and inner voices reaches its peak at the final cadence of the second movement (mm. 154-157): the melody comes to rest on G while the bass emphatically repeats the V-I cadential pattern in E♭ major; but the inner voices, now superimposed above the melody, triumphantly articulate an A major chord—yet another instance of a tritone relationship
subverting the tonality at a crucial structural juncture. The movement ends on a false note, so to speak, and a third movement is needed to resolve the ambiguity.

Example 9: *Concierto para Quinteto*, mm. 156-158

Yet Piazzolla does not so much *resolve* these tonal difficulties as render them irrelevant and sweep them aside with an energetic and completely unambiguous finale in C minor (mm. 159-210). Here we see a return of the contrapuntal techniques that characterized the first movement, with a new ground bass motif and quasi-fugal procedures. The texture builds slowly, the voices entering one at a time, leading to a unison climax in m. 199. Towards the end of the movement Piazzolla gives the guitar player *carte blanche*, the written part replaced with the instruction “*improvisando*” and chord symbols.

Example 10: *Concierto para Quinteto*, mm. 167-174 (3rd mvt. ground bass motif)
Looking at the overall tonal construction of the piece, one can make the general observation that the deeper one delves into the more fundamental levels of musical structure, the more tenuous the tonal relationships become. Regular, functional tonal progressions are the norm at the phrase level, and there is even considerable logic in the tonal motion from movement to movement: C# minor gives way to A minor, a chromaticized submediant relationship (not a closely related key, but by no means an unusual progression), and the E♭ major at the end of the second movement leads to C minor in the third. Yet it seems futile to look for any kind of broad, overarching tonal progression that governs the entire composition. Indeed, the pervasive emphasis on tritone relationships in the first and second movements strongly indicates that tonal regularity—ending the piece in the same key it began—was simply not one of Piazzolla’s compositional priorities.

**New Arrangement for Woodwind Quintet**

It is my opinion that Piazzolla’s music in general, and *Concierto para Quinteto* in particular, is especially well suited to adaptation for woodwind instruments. There are several reasons for this, the first being that the bandoneon—always the lead voice in Piazzolla’s music and the iconic instrument of the tango—is essentially a wind instrument itself. Natalio Gorin explains the construction of the instrument:

> The bandoneon is from the concertina family, but it is square, not polygonal. It is actually a portable wind instrument in which sound is produced, singly or many notes at a time, by two systems of metal tongues (one called *canto* or melody, the other *bajo* or bass), which vibrate in two acoustic boxes that also hold two sets of buttons.

> The instrument is similar to the accordion in that both are free reed instruments—the reeds vibrate freely in their openings, unlike those of beating reed instruments such as the pipe organ and clarinet, in which the reeds vibrate against the edges of air openings.\(^{38}\)

> In my own arrangement I strove to have the reed instruments in the woodwind quintet playing the prominent bandoneon lines as often as possible. In instances where the counterpoint

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\(^{38}\) Gorin, 34.
permitted doubling, I found the combinations of unison clarinet and low flute, unison clarinet and horn, and oboe and bassoon in octaves to be particularly apt at evoking the darkness and depth of the bandoneon’s sound while maintaining an appropriate balance of instrumental timbres in the context of the woodwind quintet.

Piazzolla’s ensembles, the Quinteto Nuevo Tango especially, tended to be quite heterogeneous in their instrumentation (a trait they share with the woodwind quintet), which is another reason his music works so well for mixed groups of woodwinds. We have already seen that Piazzolla thought of his Quinteto much like a reduction of the full orchestra; similarly, the woodwind quintet can be regarded as a reduction of the orchestral wind section. The fact that each instrument has its own distinct timbre helps to maintain the integrity of each individual voice in the polyphonic textures that Piazzolla favored.

In the case of *Concierto para Quinteto* and other works Piazzolla wrote for his Quinteto Nuevo Tango, there is also a one-to-one correlation with the woodwind quintet in terms of the number of instruments involved. In many cases this makes arranging the music much easier, although in practice the correlation is not always applicable because the woodwind quintet consists of five melody instruments, whereas all the instruments in Piazzolla’s Quinteto were capable of producing chords. Consequently, when creating my arrangement it was often necessary to decide—particularly when dealing with the piano and guitar parts—which inner voices could be left out of chordal accompaniment parts without obscuring the harmony or disrupting voice leading practices. The result is a texture that is perhaps not quite as full as in the original version, but I believe that I have been successful at keeping the essential character of the music intact.

I also rejected a cut-and-dried method of arranging that would have entailed simply assigning the entire bandoneon part to the clarinet, for example, or the violin part to the flute. I tried my best to distribute the material equally amongst all the instruments, for reasons pertaining to the finer
points of orchestration when dealing with the instruments of the woodwind quintet (range, timbre, balance, facility, etc.), and also so that every player who performs my arrangement would have the opportunity to play the role of soloist at some point. In a few cases my hand was forced somewhat: the bassoon is the only instrument in the woodwind quintet with a low enough range to credibly perform most of the bass lines, which means that the bassoon is locked into that role for most of the piece. Compared with the flute or clarinet, the horn is generally not as well suited to playing many of the more acrobatic solo parts, and in my arrangement most often plays the role of an inner voice. However, when opportunity permitted I believe I was successful in diversifying the roles of these two instruments: for example, there are often times when the violin melody hovers around A and G below the staff, making it too low for the flute or oboe, so in some cases I chose to assign those passages to the horn.

Regarding the choice of clarinet in A for the first movement: the key scheme of the piece is such that if the clarinetist plays the same instrument for every movement, he/she will at some point have to play exceptionally difficult passagework in E-flat minor. Not wanting to impose such a burden on anyone, I decided to have the clarinetist switch from A clarinet to B♭ clarinet between the first and second movements. However, during play testing it was demonstrated that the 1.5 bars I had allowed for the switch was not enough time. My solution was to interpolate two extra bars of accompanimental “vamp” before the clarinet entrance at the beginning of the second movement, to give the player more time to change instruments. This change, along with a written-out repeat I added in the third movement, causes my arrangement to be 18 bars longer than the original. References to bar numbers in the foregoing discussion pertain to the original published version of the piece, and in the following discussion to my arrangement.

My arrangement begins with bassoon and horn in octaves introducing the ground bass pattern that governs the first movement (mm. 1-6). If possible I probably would have had them in
unison, but the horn’s practical range does not extend low enough, and the octave doubling lends a pleasing depth and color. At first I followed the original score and did not put any articulation markings over these notes, but upon testing the arrangement with a live group of performers, I decided the articulation needed to be clarified in order to better evoke the sound of the pizzicato double bass. I wanted each note to have a certain amount of body, but I also wanted the sense of space that a pizzicato effect gives between the notes. Input from my colleagues with whom I tested out the arrangement led to my choosing to mark each quarter note with both a staccato and a tenuto in order to achieve the intended effect.

Mm. 7-8, the stacked minor triads/tritone cluster (see also Example 3, p. 22), was one of the instances where the inability of the individual wind instruments to produce full chords proved challenging. How to render such a dense chord cluster with only five voices? I chose to use the 5th of each triad (except for the F#m chord that sounds on the last eighth note of m. 7; since C# was already sounding in the bass, I had the horn play F# there instead), which was generally the tone that sounded most prominent in recordings of the piece. It also emphasized the tritone relationships with the tones already sounding in the other voices, in keeping with the primary importance of that interval in this work. The resulting construct reduces the cluster to a C#7 chord with an added F# in the horn, in an open position that covers nearly four octaves. The wide spacing masks the relationship between the chord members, and the added F# injects some additional ambiguity. The flutter tongue on the flute E5 in m. 8 was inspired by the tremolo that violinist Gidon Kremer plays there in his 1996 recording of Concierto para Quinteto.30

In the next passage (mm. 9-16) I assigned the melody to the flute and clarinet in unison. Both instruments are in a register that does not project well, so the doubling provides some extra

30 Gidon Kremer (violin) with Per Arne Glorvigen (bandoneon), Vadim Sakharov (piano) and Alois Posch (double bass), “Concierto para Quinteto” on Hommage à Piazzolla, Nonesuch Records 79407-2, 1996, CD.
power and color. Upon hearing the arrangement played, I decided that the dynamic in the melody parts needed to be marked up from *piano* to *mezzo piano*, because in spite of the doubling it was still not cutting through the texture. I removed the octave doubling in the horn and piano, leaving the bass line to the bassoon alone in order to avoid covering melody and freeing up the horn to play the 3+3+2 ostinato that was originally in the piano part. This is one of the instances where I was forced to leave out some chord members, but in this case the tonic harmony is so clearly defined in the other voices that it was not a problem. I elected to have the horn play the ostinato on the pitch G♯, the fifth of the chord, in order to maximize the clash with the G♮s in the melody part.

In mm. 17-31 I had the clarinet and oboe play the melody and countermelody originally set for bandoneon and electric guitar. It is my opinion that on many of Piazzolla’s recordings, especially those he made with his second Quinteto, the sound levels for the electric guitar are too low, which leads to that instrument taking a “back seat” in the ensemble. In order to ensure that those parts are heard in my own arrangement, I often found it useful to assign them to the oboe, whose penetrating tone color in the middle and upper part of its range has little problem cutting through the rest of the ensemble.

In this same passage I had the flute take the violin part, which in the original version featured a series of *portamento* gestures up to a high G♯₆ (see Example 4, p. 23). These gestures proved ungainly to imitate on flute, so I changed the *portamento* notation to a half-step grace note, which achieved a similar effect in a much more idiomatically appropriate way. Another thing in the violin part that proved impossible to emulate exactly was the long, slow, descending glissando in mm. 23-25, an effect that appears often in Piazzolla’s music and that some have compared to the sound of a police siren.⁴⁰ None of the instruments in the woodwind quintet are able to achieve this effect, but I did not want to simply leave it out and put nothing in its place; so after trying a few

⁴⁰ *Azzi & Collier, 160.*
different things I decided that having the flute use the jet whistle technique there was a good substitute.

Originally, I had all instruments marked *mezzo forte* in mm. 17-25 in keeping with the notation in the original score, which tends to assign the same dynamic marking to all parts in a given section (I don't know if that was Piazzolla’s decision or an editor’s), but the more static parts in the horn and especially the high flute were covering the counterpoint in the oboe and clarinet. My solution was to mark the flute and horn down to *mezzo piano*. For the remainder of the piece, I made sure that the bass line and any instrument that has a static accompaniment part was marked one dynamic level lower than the melody to ensure the proper balance.

For the section with the texture change at mm. 32-40 (see also Example 5, p. 24) I wanted to give the bassoon a chance to do something melodic, so I had the horn cover the bass line while the bassoon and oboe play the melody in octaves. I also wanted the bright, pointed sound of the double reeds to stand out against the darker timbres of the accompaniment parts. Initially, I was concerned that I had written the bassoon part too high, but it turned out that while difficult, it was still practicable, so I kept it as it was. For the tonic pedal in the flute and clarinet, I experimented with having the flute play the G♯₅ above the staff instead of G♯₄, to match what the piano part does in the original score, but it stuck out of the texture too much and competed with the oboe timbre in same register.

For the sequential material in mm. 45-58, I decided to use clarinet and flute in unison again for the upper melody voice the first time, then in octaves for the repeat to broaden the range and scope of the sound. In the same passage there is a countermelody—originally in the violin—that works nicely on the horn. For the second iteration of the sequence, I especially wanted to write a part for high horn that would add volume and excitement to the climax of the movement, so I had the horn shadow the clarinet part with a descending line beginning on concert E₅.
In the lyrical transitional passage that leads into the second movement (mm. 62-79), I allowed the flute and horn to drop out of the texture, leaving only the reed instruments. This was in order to highlight the change in the character of the music and to achieve some variety in the orchestration, so that all five instruments were not playing constantly; furthermore, the harmonies and voice leading here were sufficiently clear with only three voices. It also allowed me to have the horn free to interject occasionally (mm. 67 & 71). I assigned the violin melody to the oboe, while the clarinet contributes the inner voice and the bassoon the bass line. Having the melody in the oboe was the timbre I wanted here, but occasionally it caused some difficulties because the original part dips down to low A\textsuperscript{3} on two occasions, in mm. 72 and 77, extending beyond the oboe’s range. I would have had the same problem if the flute were playing that melody, and to have the clarinet do it would not solve anything either because neither the flute nor the oboe has a range low enough to cover the inner voice. In the end, the solution I adopted was to simply leave those two notes out; while not an ideal fix, the contour and character of the melody nonetheless remained intact.

Before moving on to discuss the second movement, I want to mention a few additions I made in my arrangement that do not appear in the published score of the original version. In the original score the tempo marking for the first movement is “Andante,” with no additional instructions regarding tempo. However, listening to the 1986 recording of the work that Piazzolla made with the second Quinteto (which I consider a particularly masterful interpretation), in practice they did something a bit different. The initial tempo is approximately $\downarrow = 100$ bpm. The performers then execute a long, steady accelerando all the way to the climax of the movement in m. 53, by which time the tempo is around $\downarrow = 132$ bpm, before dropping back to tempo primo for the transition section in m. 63.\footnote{Astor Piazzolla, “Concierto para Quinteto” on Tango: Zero Hour, The New Tango Quintet, Nonesuch Records 79469-2, 1986, CD.} In light of all this, I added metronome markings and accelerando instructions to
my arrangement to coincide with this revised tempo scheme. Given the repetitive nature of the material in the first movement, adding these tempo variations helps to provide the music with more forward momentum.

Another thing that I did in my arrangement was to write in some of the improvised ornamentation that Piazzolla and his musicians added in performances of Concierto para Quinteto. Some examples include the grace notes in mm. 17-22, and the scalar figures in mm. 27 & 53-57. In particular, Piazzolla allowed his violin players considerable expressive freedom in the transitional section at the end of the first movement (mm. 62-79), something I sought to encapsulate in the way I notated the rhythms, and in the added instruction “molto rubato, ad lib.” These written-out ornamentations may not be necessary for those who are already deeply familiar with Piazzolla’s style and the type of improvisation he valued in his music, but to the uninitiated they will hopefully provide some indication as to what forms of expression are necessary and appropriate.

The second movement was the most challenging part of the piece to arrange, particularly the bandoneon solo in mm. 80-109. Choosing which instrument would play the solo part was easy enough (I decided to use the clarinet); the difficulty lay in arranging the accompaniment parts to be as harmonically clear and as unobtrusive as possible in the texture, while dealing with the limitations on the lower end of the flute and oboe range. Originally I had solved this difficulty by simply taking the flute and oboe parts up an octave, but this put them in the same tessitura as the clarinet part (and occasionally even higher), detracting from the prominence of the solo line. A better solution, and the one I ended up using in the end, was to alter the position of the problematic chords in the flute and oboe parts, transposing just the middle voice up by an octave instead of both voices; this fixed the range issue without causing competition with the soloist.

In the next passage (mm. 110-125), I chose to divide the violin solo between the flute and the oboe. For the first part of the solo, only the flute could reach the high B♭ in without undue strain,
and m. 118 seemed like a good place to introduce a new color, so I had the oboe take over there. During the flute solo, the oboe plays a flowing countermelody over whole-note chords in the horn and clarinet. The flutter tonguing in the flute and clarinet parts in mm. 120-125 is an attempt to mimic an eerie noise that Piazzolla achieves with his bandoneon in the 1986 recording, an effect that does not appear in the score.42

For the melody voices in the passage from mm. 126-133, I had the idea to gradually transition from brighter to darker instrumental timbres: flute and oboe in unison gives way to flute and horn in octaves, then the horn is left alone. This paves the way for the horn to take up the melody in m. 134-160, in unison with the clarinet. I knew I wanted the dark, sonorous tenor voice of the horn in this passage, but at first I was not sure which instrument, if any, should double the horn. Early on, I experimented with having the bassoon double the horn, and have the clarinet take over the bass line. Yet although I liked the horn and bassoon together, the clarinet just did not have a low enough range to play the bass line without actually sounding in the same register or higher than the melody. So I returned the bass line to the bassoon, and had the clarinet double the horn melody. When I first heard it played by the horn and clarinet together, I could not really identify the clarinet’s sound in the texture, so I asked the clarinet player to drop out to see if perhaps it was not necessary to have the part doubled at all. But when he did so, I realized that the clarinet had been contributing more to the blend than I had thought—enriching the horn’s sound without detracting from its lead role—so I decided to keep the doubling.

The third movement was the easiest part of the piece to arrange. The counterpoint in this movement is so clear and precise and the harmonies so unambiguous that after I made the initial decision about which instrument would play each line, there were very few other choices to be

42 I am not exactly sure what Piazzolla does to achieve this effect, which I have not heard on any of his other recordings. My best guess is that he is gradually depressing the buttons on his instrument to bend the pitch downward, creating a sense of distortion.
made. The bassoon obviously had to be the bass voice throughout; only the clarinet had the low range and flexibility to play the solo guitar part; only the flute had a high enough range to play the high notes in the piano and violin parts in mm. 192 to the end. Of the two remaining voices, the voice that enters in m. 177 was much better suited to the oboe, leaving the last part to the horn.

The only question left after all the above considerations had been handled was: what to do about the improvised guitar passages in mm. 201 to the end? Listening to recordings of the piece by the Quinteto Nuevo Tango for inspiration, I liked what the guitarists in both the first and the second Quinteto did, so I decided to combine both approaches in my arrangement. For the first time through the repeated section that begins at m. 201, I copied out the scalar runs that Horacio Malvicino played in the 1986 recording of the second Quinteto, and for the second time through I transcribed the more chromatic passagework that Cacho Tirao (not one of Piazzolla’s regular guitarists, but a fine player) played in the 1971 debut recording with the first Quinteto. Along with the two interpolated measures at the beginning of the second movement, this written-out repeat is one of the reasons my arrangement has 18 more bars than the original score.

**Conclusion**

It is my hope that the foregoing discussion of my decision-making process in creating this new woodwind quintet arrangement of *Concierto para Quinteto* demonstrates a thorough understanding of the piece, a respect for the composer’s intentions, and a realistic outlook on the challenges of adapting the music for a different group of instrumentalists. I also hope that other woodwind players will appreciate my arrangement and perform it on their own programs. While *Concierto para Quinteto* is tremendously effective in its original version, such a configuration of instruments is unusual and good bandoneon players are fairly hard to come by, meaning that live performances of the work will remain rare. Creating adaptations of Piazzolla’s music for more standard ensembles should make programming these works a bit easier, thereby making them more
accessible to a broader section of the public and giving them the exposure I firmly believe they
deserve.
APPENDIX A

CONCIERTO PARA QUINTETO FOR WOODWIND QUINTET

Astor Piazzolla
arr. Samuel Peliska

Andante \( \frac{\text{d}}{\text{b}} = 100 \)

Flute

Oboe

Clarinet in A

Horn in F

Bassoon

\( \text{simile} \)

\( \text{(flutter tongue)} \)
molto rubato, ad lib.

(flutter tongue)
molto rall.

Presto \( \text{\textbar} = 76 \)
molto rall.

APPENDIX B

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Mr. Samuel Peliska
DM Candidate
Florida State University

Receipt No. 2014-40192
client number 47143
Date 30.10.2014
Please state for all payments or queries!

Your order Mr. Samuel Peliska
Your receipt Order 23.10.2014
Our VAT number DE811324809
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Licence confirmation

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Declaration

Arranger of the music: Samuel Peliska
Title of the work: Concierto Para Quinteto
Composer: Astor Piazzolla
Formation of the arrangement: Woodwind Quintet (fl, ob, cl, hn, bsn)
Length: Approximately 9 minutes
Type of the performance: concertante chamber music
Purpose of use: Doctoral treatise project at Florida State University
Territory: United States

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REFERENCES


Kremer, Gidon, violin. “Concierto para Quinteto” on *Hommage à Piazzolla*. With Per Arne Glorvigen (bandoneon), Vadim Sakharov (piano) and Alois Posch (double bass). Nonesuch Records 79407-2. 1996. CD.


——. *Concierto para Quinteto*. RCA Records. 1971. CD


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Samuel Peliska is currently pursuing his doctorate in clarinet performance at the Florida State University College of Music, under the direction of Deborah Bish. Since beginning his studies at FSU in the fall of 2010, Mr. Peliska has consistently occupied principal chairs in the College of Music’s top graduate ensembles. In February 2012, he was a featured soloist with the FSU Philharmonia Orchestra, performing the Bozza Clarinet Concerto as the winner of the College’s annual Young Artist Competition. He received a master of music degree from FSU in the spring of 2012, under the instruction of Frank Kowalsky.

Mr. Peliska holds a bachelor of music degree from the Cleveland Institute of Music, where he studied under Franklin Cohen, principal clarinet of the Cleveland Orchestra. At CIM he performed frequently as a member of the Cleveland Institute of Music Orchestra, one of the country’s premier conservatory orchestral programs.

Mr. Peliska is also a lover of the operatic repertoire: during the summer of 2011 he played in the orchestra of the Opera in the Ozarks festival in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, and over the years he has performed many times as a member of the Opera Naples Orchestra in Naples, Florida.

In addition to performing and listening to music, Mr. Peliska enjoys classic literature and the study of philosophy.