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Program Notes

The origins of Tango are a bit murky, but can be traced to the immigrant communities of Buenos Aires and Montevideo in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century. These polyglot neighborhoods along the Rio de la Plata were home to newly arrived opera-loving working-class Italians, habañera-schooled Spaniards, milonga-dancing gauchos, African drummers and dancers, Jewish violinists from Poland and Russia, German accordion players, Hungarian lovers of gypsy music -- dreamers and fighters all. Tango was their music, the sound track of their daily dramas.

The respectable ladies and gentlemen of Buenos Aires were appalled at the abandon and sensuality of Tango, but their adventurous offspring were intrigued and made discreet visits to the low-income neighborhoods to listen to the music and learn the dance. One of these young men introduced Tango to the high society of Paris around 1911, spurring a passion for Tango and all things Latin. By 1913, Tango, with its air of forbidden seduction, was the toast of Paris.

Tango's success in Paris transformed the music scene in Buenos Aires. By the 1930's, small ad hoc music groups had become well-rehearsed orchestras. Classically trained musicians moonlighted at tango cafes; poets abandoned traditional verse to write tango lyrics. In a fit of patriotism, the government decreed that half of all radio programming be of Argentine origin. Tango orchestras raced to answer the call, sending Tango over the airwaves throughout Argentina. Just as country music and jazz became the national genres of the United States via radio, Tango became Argentina's national music thanks to these broadcasts.

Tango reigned until the arrival of rock and roll. Like the big bands in this country, the great tango orchestras fell on hard times as young people were swept away by youthful, drum-centric groups like the Beatles. By the late 1950's Tango was only for seniors. A few musicians continued to pour creative ideas into Tango - Julian Plaza, Mariano Mores, Horacio Salgán, Osvaldo Berlinghieri, Eduardo Baffa - but the youth of Argentina wasn't listening.

Two important artistic events in Paris launched Tango's renaissance: the arrival of Astor Piazzolla and the debut of "Tango Argentina." Astor Piazzolla was an Argentine tango musician who dreamed of coming a classical composer. In 1953 he won a scholarship to study in Paris with Nadia Boulanger. With her guidance, he created Nuevo Tango, a synthesis of classical techniques and tango's passion. It wasn't until the 1983 Parisian debut of the show "Tango Argentino," however, that Tango re-took the international stage. Featuring musicians and dancers held over from Tango's Golden Age, "Tango Argentino" electrified Paris, then went on to tour the world, including two successful Broadway runs. Everywhere it played, audiences went mad for tango dance. Today, in almost any city in the world, it is possible to find a *milonga*, a tango dance, and people from diverse cultures locked in a close embrace celebrating life three minutes at a time. Damascus, Tokyo, Istanbul, Dar es Salaam, Rio de Janeiro, Moscow, Philadelphia, Montreal – wherever you travel next, google "tango" and check out the local tango scene. It's a community that welcomes all who love the music and the dance.

Tango is dance, music, and poetry: the voice of Buenos Aires. In 2009 Tango was awarded World Cultural Heritage status, a stunning honor for the humble gift the poor neighborhoods along the Rio de la Plata gave to the world.

—notes by Joan Singer