

# ***Las cuatro estaciones porteñas (The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires), for Violin and String Orchestra***

## **Astor Piazzolla**

**B**orn in Argentina, Astor Piazzolla grew up in New York City, where his family had moved in 1925. Here, he learned to play the bandoneón, a concertina-accordion whose timbre instantly evokes the Argentine tango. (In deference to his Italian family heritage and American upbringing, he preferred that the double “l” in his surname be sounded as the English “l” rather than with the Spanish or Argentine pronunciation as a “y” or “zh.”)

Returning to his native country at the age of 16, Piazzolla established himself as a working musician and performed with many popular ensembles before forming his own tango orchestra, the Orquesta del 46, in 1946. In that year he wrote his first tango, the genre in which he would make an important mark as a composer. In 1950 he disbanded his ensemble, the better to dedicate his time to composing, and as early as 1953 he produced his first works for symphonic forces. The following year he received a grant from the French Government to travel to Paris; there he studied with Nadia Boulanger, who urged him to develop his language as a composer on a foundation of distinctly Argentine sound. “Up to then,” he recalled,

I had composed symphonies, chamber music, string quartets; but when Nadia Boulanger analysed my music, she said she could find nowhere any Piazzolla. She could find Ravel and Stravinsky, also Béla Bartók and Hindemith — but never Piazzolla. ... Nadia made me play a tango to her and then she said, “You idiot! That is the real Piazzolla!” So I threw away all the other music and, in 1954, started working on my New Tango.

By 1956 he began presenting his hybrid tangos in concert. On his return to Argentina he formed the Octeto de Buenos Aires, the first of several chamber ensembles that would serve as

a sort of laboratory for his continuing experiments in developing tango as a genre of contemporary music.

During the 1960s and ’70s, Piazzolla appeared most widely with his Quintet, which was made up of piano, bandoneón, violin, electric guitar, and bass. In 1965 the Argentine government sent the ensemble as cultural emissaries on a tour of Brazil and the United States. In the latter, they scored a great success performing at Philharmonic (now David Geffen) Hall, with *The New York Times* proclaiming that the group “sounded like nothing but itself, and that was quite enough.”

Piazzolla returned to Buenos Aires that June, the day before a session at which the group was to record his original incidental music for an upcoming production of *Melenita de oro*, a play by his friend Alberto Rodríguez Muñoz. He had

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## **IN SHORT**

**Born:** March 11, 1921, in Mar del Plata, Argentina

**Died:** July 4, 1992, in Buenos Aires

**Work composed:** June 1965–1970; arranged for solo violin with string orchestra by Leonid Desyatnikov, 1999

**World premiere:** *Verano porteño* was first heard as part of the recorded incidental music for a theater production in Buenos Aires in August 1965; Piazzolla and his quintet premiered the complete suite on May 19, 1970, at the Teatro Regina in Buenos Aires.

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** these performances

**Estimated duration:** ca. 23 minutes

forgotten about the project, but he penned the requisite pieces overnight. One of the movements became famous as a stand-alone work, *Verano porteño*. (In Argentine usage, the adjective *porteño* refers to Buenos Aires.) Over the next few years, Piazzolla wrote three further “Seasons,” and his Quintet unveiled the four-movement suite in May 1970 at a packed-to-the-gills concert that was recorded live and released on LP shortly thereafter.

Piazzolla’s “Seasons” are among the most advanced examples of his New Tango style. Boulanger’s comment likening his music to Bartók’s makes sense in light of certain nervous, edgy passages at the beginning of *Verano porteño*, although the spacious melodies and salon-jazz harmonizations for which Piazzolla is famous are also evident in abundance. Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* were by then enjoying a resurgence in popularity, and Piazzolla made a discreet bow to them, structuring each of his “Seasons” in a tripartite, fast-slow-fast form and even including some melodic allusions, most prominently the rapid descending scales and then the pizzicato “raindrops” in the third section of *Invierno porteño*. When Leonid Desyatnikov arranged the suite for solo violin with

## The Order of the Seasons

Vivaldi leaves no doubt about the order in which his *Four Seasons* concertos are to be played. In his Op. 8 publication, they appear in calendar order: *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter*. The matter is less straightforward when it comes to Piazzolla’s set. He wrote *Summer* first, not envisioning that it would be part of a tetraptych. Four years later he wrote his *Winter* piece, and the year after that he completed the remaining two movements. When he premiered them as a set, he placed them in the order *Winter, Summer, Autumn, Spring*. That is accordingly how they appear on the live recording of that performance, but the sequence was not set in stone. The catalogue of Piazzolla’s publisher lists the four pieces in various orders when they appear in arrangements for different forces. In this concert, the set begins as Piazzolla did, with *Summer*, and then continues in calendar order, with *Autumn, Winter, and Spring*.

string orchestra in 1999, on commission from violinist Gidon Kremer, he expanded on that aspect, incorporating into his arrangement 15 quotations of varying lengths that intensify the link between Piazzolla’s pieces and Vivaldi’s.

**Instrumentation:** string orchestra, in addition to the solo violin.

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## A New Genre

The tango Piazzolla inherited was an overtly sexy dance, born in the back alleys and brothels of Buenos Aires. He injected a sense of modernity into the genre, so transforming it that his music – and that of his colleagues and followers – defines the New Tango in contradistinction to the classic dance form, which is referred to as *tango de la guardia vieja*. While the classic tango remains recognizable as the root of his music, his pieces also reflect aspects of jazz as well as classical developments that trace their ancestry to Stravinsky. Piazzolla’s works met resistance from tango traditionalists, many of whom dismissed them outright; indeed, he viewed his compositions as essentially works of classical chamber music.



*Sunday afternoon tango dancing in Plaza Dorrego, Buenos Aires*