

# *Miriam Conti: Not just Tangos*

GREGG DEERING

I enjoyed the music on your CD *Looking South*. I've never heard a collection of Argentinean music based on dance and folk forms. It's a beautifully paced and beautifully played album. We don't do CD reviews, so luckily the concert will feature some of the works on the CD as well as some contemporary premieres and a belated premiere by the Spanish composer Ernesto Halffter - it's a full concert.

**Question.** Let me start with a naïve question, do all piano students know the works on the CD in Argentina?

**Answer.** No,(laughs)... that's the sad thing... of all the works on the CD perhaps only three composers are well known and performed. It's the same in American music - when I went to Juilliard most American pianists did not know American composers. Except for Gershwin, that seemed to be it. Maybe a few other living American composers - Copland, when he was alive.

In Argentina these were not part of the repertoire. In the classical conservatory students studied the classical standards, Chopin Beethoven, and then it might be mandatory to learn one or two of the most well known Argentine composers' works. But the pieces I have on the CD, maybe one is known to students in Argentina. I'm thinking of the oldest work on the CD, the *Gato* by Julian Aguirre, from 1918. Aguirre is played a lot, but he did not write much for the piano. Ginastera, of course is well know, there are two works on the CD, but all the others need to be more recognized.

**Q.** Maybe I assumed that the repertoire was well known because of the interest in folk music and a nationalistic focus of the composers.

**A.** I chose composers who reflect that part of the nationalistic idioms, but of course there are many styles in 20th Century Argentinean piano music. I could have made a CD of composers who sound like Schoenberg or other atonal or serial composers. You would not



Miriam Conti

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know that they were from Argentina.

**Q.** On the CD you go from Julian Aguirre's *Gato*, written in 1918 to the most recent piece, a tango by Mario Broeders from 1998, but the bulk of the works are from the 1930s and 40s - was that a central time for interest in nationalistic themes?

**A.** Well, I think it was true across the US and Europe as well, Nationalism has a strong effect on the arts. But Argentina also had many different influences. All western countries had many different artistic influences during those decades. We had influences, local influences, but primarily they came from Europe. They might be atonal, traditionalist, neo-classical, neo-romantic, neo this... neo that... It's funny because even with all of those things going on these composers were still able to compose in a nationalistic way — but adding those folk idioms to their established style.

**Q.** The works have clear European influences, Debussy, Stravinsky, they fit in with mainstream of 20th century piano literature; the composers handle, really subsume, the thematic or folk material. Very far from the picturesque handling we are used to from outsiders to Spanish or South American music.

**A.** I guess the only comparison you could have is with jazz in America. If every American composer: Copland, Diamond, Persichetti, Piston all took elements of jazz you might have had something like the movement in Argentina. There you had composers who took national idioms and incorporated in the classical compositional style that they were already working in.

Could some one do it with country music, I don't know, they did not. In Argentina we had a very strong folk music base, and a strong respect for the folk idioms, I mean from the north to the south of Argentina we have a lot of different music we'd call folk music. It's not just *Tango*, we have had a lot of influences, from Spain from Italy from everywhere. A lot of people migrated to Argentina.

**Q.** The *Gato* and the *Tango* are folk music or would you call them popular music?

**A.** Folk. All the dances are folk. Now the Tango is a phenomenon, whether they say it came from France or Africa. It's a phenomenon, maybe it's not a folk idiom purely, but it was created in Argentina.

**Q.** I ask because jazz is a popular music drawn from many sources. But from ragtime on you would not call it folk music. Usually when a classical composer uses jazz — he makes sure you know that he's borrowing a jazz idiom.

**A.** When you start talking about popular and folk, in Argentina it's a little different. For example I have four *Gatos* on the CD, the more classical one, the Aguirre, you could say that it's written in a folk-ish but sophisticated way. Then you take the folk idiom that Ramos uses in his *Gato*- he intentionally gives it a more popular sound. What do I mean by popular sound, well — maybe you could be in a stadium, instead of a concert hall, playing these and you would attract a large audience. It's like Andrea Bocelli singing arias, it's taken out of established operas, Puccini, etc... but when he sings them they become popular

somehow. That's good and many people like it, but it may not be in the best interests of the music.

The *Tango* started as an instrumental form, though most people don't know it, they think of it as dance music. Initially you had a violin, a flute and a guitar. It was a dance later, then taken up by society orchestras, and later by large orchestras. Then Piazzolla came along. He wanted his *Tangos* to be played in a concert hall, or in a bar, but only to be played for people, not for dancing. He hated that, he didn't want his music to be danced to, he wanted people to sit and listen. He was not an accompanist to dancers. So every time I go to a show where people are dancing to Piazzolla's music, I think poor guy, this is exactly what he didn't want. Jazz evolved the same way with Armstrong and Ellington - people danced to their music, but more and more they came up to the bandstand and just listened, soon they could fill concert halls. Piazzolla was the same way, he wanted to be the focus, he wanted the music to be the focus.

**Q.** When you approach these works, how do you decide on interpretation?

**A.** First I have picked the works that I feel most comfortable with. This is true also of Beethoven sonatas, there are some that I feel more comfortable with. So if I am going to do a project like this I choose works that fit my temperament. Also there is the point of the idiomatic expression that. I hear these dances all the time, so they are “in my system,” but my approach is the same as it is for Mozart or Schubert sonatas — anything you like. First of all you look at the music and follow the composer's every detail. If he is a good composer he is going to tell you exactly what to do, you follow the music and add your own feeling. In Chopin, for instance, a Horowitz interpretation might get to people and not the Rubinstein but they are both valid interpretations.

So I approach these works with the same respect I approach any work I want to perform. Then there is an idiomatic expression, since I am Argentinean I am familiar with the sources. But then you can say I wasn't born in Poland, but the Chopin *Mazurkas* speak to me, and I can do it probably as good as any Polish pianist.

**Q.** Well maybe that's a challenge to a Polish pianist to do a CD of Argentine nationalist compositions.

**A.** Exactly, maybe it would be better, there is no way to know. Although, I have to say that that playing *Tangos* it is a different thing altogether. When you look at a *Tango*, when you look at a score, you know popular sheet music — it's so “square” If you don't know how the *Tango* goes you'd never know how to get it from the sheet music.

I did Spanish dancing as a child so that also is a part of my life. I play this music, I love this music but I play Beethoven and Chopin as well. In any case, I did Flamenco, maybe if I had studied tap dancing I might be able to play jazz. Does it make a difference - I don't know. I think it's also true of Duke Ellington's music - you could look at the sheet music and it looks “square.” In jazz or in a *Tango* it's something you have to have digested all your life for it to come out naturally, though there are some Argentines that cannot play the repertoire because it's not what they feel. It's acquired, not necessarily natural. I have

played a lot of works by jazz composers, and maybe what attracts me is a similar sense of freedom.

What I want this CD to show is that this music can become part of the standard repertoire. You play your Chopin, Prokofiev and Shostakovich and now works by Ginastera have entered the repertoire. There is a lot of great music from Latin American countries, Mexico, Colombia, Chile, and Venezuela, that deserves to be known. They don't fit the current concert model, but maybe that's changing.

**Q.** Let's talk about the concert at Merkin Hall. I was struck by the Ernesto Halffter *Sonatina*, it's a premiere?

**A.** Yes a world premiere. The work was originally written as an orchestral piece for the ballet. Halffter was a very good pianist and he transcribed the whole thing for solo piano. His son presented the score to me and said, "No one plays this." So I took a look at it, and I really wanted to perform this work. It will be the longest work on the program.

Maybe two dances from the suite are played often, but no one knows that there is a complete suite. It's based on the Spanish Baroque, but with his modern idiom. It's kind of interesting the way he incorporates this as a device and brings in the more impressionistic treatment. He had studied with Ravel, as many people know.

**Q.** He's known as a disciple of Manuel de Falla as well.

**A.** Yes he studied with Falla and Ravel. He learned orchestration from Ravel, but he was closest to Falla. Falla taught him how to conduct and helped him get his first conducting jobs. Halffter is possibly best known for orchestrating Falla's *Six Spanish Popular Songs* as well as transcribing them for piano solo. Also Halffter was chosen by Falla's estate to finish *Atlántida*, Falla's unfinished cantata.

Spanish composers as a whole are underrated, even in Spain. I am very interested in Joaquín Turina's work. I was in Madrid recently and I found out that the Turina family maintains an archive. I went to their home and they showed me everything. All the scores, the entire piano work of Turina. I talked to people in Spain and no one knows it's there. All the letters, the scores, it's all there.

**Q.** But in your case you were not exposed to the Argentine Nationalist composers, how about the folk music?

**A.** When I was in conservatory in Argentina they would never teach you a *Tango* — don't even ask, never. You don't play that, you play Bach and so on. It's the same in America with jazz. It's for the "lower classes".

That's why I look at the Russians, they have a lot of love for their composers, a great respect for their composers. They don't make the same distinctions we do with popular music. In Argentina, and the US we have a bigger separation between what the people listen to and define as popular and what we call classical. In Beethoven's time there would not be this distinction, because they did not hear one or

need one. We want to blame everybody for this division, but some of this responsibility falls on the interpreters. We need to open the concept of the recital to include more repertoire. We are in danger of musicians themselves becoming distant from what is exciting about music, if I am bored in a passionless concert, imagine how bored the musicians are. But that's why I've always done a lot of new music as well.

**Q.** You are doing two contemporary works, works by Benjamin Lees and David Winkler

**A.** I have known Ben for a while. As a student at Juilliard I was pretty much the pianist people would come to play their new work. Every composer would bring something and I'd play it. I liked that, I discovered a lot of new music. This got me into new music, and of course showed me what I liked and didn't like in new music.

I stated this relationship, first with the students and then with the teachers. There was David Diamond, Vincent Persichetti, and soon Morton Gould. It became kind of an addiction — you want to know everything new out there.

The new is a big pull for me. So every concert I work with living composers. I have premiered Ben's first two Odyssey works for piano. Now I will be performing the third. Ben has had major commissions from orchestras and chamber music centers across the country, and I am very happy that he writes these works for me.

He describes them as a journey to the unknown. It's tonal, very “coloristic,” fragmented, minimalist piece. It changes - it's an odyssey after all.

David Winkler, I was looking for some one to write a theme and variations. I love the form, the way a composer develops a theme. I asked him to do it, he said OK, but he'd never done a theme and variations before, but fortunately it's a wonderful piece. I hate to make comparisons, but if you mix Fauré and add Kurt Weill, his rhythms and his harmonies, you'd get an idea.

I've done a lot of atonal, experimental music, you know the ones where you have to hit the keyboard with your forearm, pluck this, pull that.... I've done it and no one can say I don't know the idiom. Currently I look for work in a way that approaches what I want from a novel. It's not about beginning middle and end, but is about a flow and development.

Now, I want work that I can interpret and means something to me, whether I intend to play Argentine music, or Chopin or contemporary works. I want a balance - it has to be more than simply saying that's Chopin. I want it to be me. On the other hand people often say with Rachmaninoff's Chopin — they are hearing Rachmaninoff. But we will never know what Chopin really sounded like so if you take yourself out of the work, then there is a danger that there will be nothing there for the listener, it will be sterile and boring.

I love Bach, to me he is the most Romantic composer of all. Once you start dissecting him. But pianists will play his music like a machine. Ahh... but people will say you're over romanticizing him, but to me Bach is passionate. The Passion is about religion certainly, but there is passion in all his music. It's a passion that find in very, very few composers.

Bach should be taught this way in music schools. I have students, mostly adults, and they

are afraid of Bach. They think he will be boring. But I make them do Bach, and they fall in love. You do have to come to Bach, but when you do, there is nothing like him.

**Q.** Maybe Bach and the *Tango* concert.

**A.** Ha, I should have a concert every week. I've heard that the Argentina CD has been played over the radio here and there, it just came out and it's being played in Montana. The breadth of what the audience enjoys is huge, it's up to the performers to give up some preconceptions and understand what moves the public.

**Notas**

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