

Robert Fisk: Little has changed since the secretive days of the Suez crisis

Classical: You know when you've been tango'd

TANGO! KREMERATA QUARTET QUEEN ELIZABETH HALL SOUTH BANK CENTRE LONDON

John L. Walters

Tuesday, 9 March 1999

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GIDON KREMER'S scholarly but passionate interpretations of the "new tango" music of Astor Piazzolla (1921-92) have been a runaway success. The CDs and tours appeal to a need for "light music" with intellectual depth; for "art music" with emotional content.

Tuesday's concert had a more classical, chamber-music ambience than the more gutsy Hommage a Piazzolla or El Tango (or the composer's own recordings). The evening began with the leader playing solo, followed by some trio pieces and then the full quartet. Yet despite the absence of piano and double bass, Kremer's colleagues generated a remarkable amount of rhythmic heat in "Adios Nonino" (which the composer's band, with violinist Fernando Suarez Paz, recorded on the Live in Wien album) and the beguiling "Milonga per Tre." This featured taut Lithuanian dancer, Egle Spokaite, thin as a whip in green culottes, spotlighted while the musicians played from the corners of the stage.

Argentine bandoneon player, Marcelo Nisinman, opened the second set with a heart-rending solo version of "Oblivion", immediately followed by a couple of duets with Kremer, sentimental conversations full of nostalgia for a collective memory nobody there could have possibly experienced. The dramatic "Jeanne y Paul" required Kremer to counter Nisinman's wheezy beast of an instrument with wild noises and percussive clicks from his *garneri*.

Despite Kremer's declared passion for the music, one sensed he was having fun with the exaggerated emotions of Piazzolla's more cheesy back catalogue. Since nuevo tango = tango + tragedy + comedy + kilombo (whorehouse), as Piazzolla himself informed us on Zero Hour, this might be an example of cheap music ageing gracefully into a happy long after-life: what looked like nicotine stains turn out to be gold leaf.

For the final section of the concert, all five musicians took to the stage to perform Five Sensations for bandoneon and quartet, the stunning late 1980s collaboration commissioned by the Lincoln Center for the Kronos quartet, with Piazzolla himself. Kremerata's reading of this was faultless, but the star was Nisinman, an enigmatic half-smile playing around his lips as he coaxed chromatic impossibilities from the tangle of buttons and fingers at his left hand and lower, throatier lines from the right, occasionally exchanging some private joke by eye contact with the pretty viola player.

The sensations of the five movements - "Asleep", "Loving", "Anxiety", "Despair", and "Fear" - were countered by the smiles and concentrated expressions of pleasure on the faces of the audience in the packed hall. Mood swings, but no depression: Kremer's bitter-sweet solo melodies in "Despair" sailed over the bandonen chords before the lower strings entered for a glorious chorale, and "Fear" concluded the recital on an uptempo burst of energy. Superb intonation, dynamics and timing, plus the ensemble's easy virtuosity, made this feel like the last night of a tour, rather than the second.

And how exciting to hear an unamplified band sounding this good in the QEH acoustic - the internal balance of strings and bandonen was a masterclass of musical mixing. For the encore, all six performers returned for Nisinman's extra-melodramatic arrangement of "Adios Nonino," with virtuosic solos from Kremer and dancer Spokaite, haunting the stage like a green, Giacometti ghost. Sensational.

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