



Philip Hansen

Tango Renaissance

By Sean McLennan

The Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra's principle cellist Philip Hansen has recently released a brand new CD, *Bragatissimo*, a Tango Nuevo collection. "Tango" is a richly expressive word that will undoubtedly evoke intense auditory and visual recollections of its characteristic sound and suggestive dance; this is what tango is to most of us here up north. However, south of the equator, where tango breathes through the passionate Latin culture that gave it life, the music and dance have evolved into a complex family of nuanced sub-genres—tango nuevo—probably isn't what you'd expect.

One Argentine composer, Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992), is credited with originating tango nuevo and bringing a "tango renaissance" after World War II. He infused his tango with harmonics influenced by contemporary classical composers like Bartok, Schoenberg, and Messiaen, and rhythms influenced by Stravinsky and jazz. Consequently, tango nuevo is

more melodic and the traditional beat tends to drift in and out—it could be characterized as "concert tango" since it's a lot less suitable to dance.

As an innovative style, tango Nuevo was controversial. It's hard to understand why without realizing how closely tango is tied to the national identity of Argentina. Tango, truly a music of the people, which had its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century streets and bordellos of Buenos Aires, swept the world in very short period of time. However, after the coup against President Perón, tango was suppressed by the new regime because it was considered too nationalistic. This was the political climate of Buenos Aires that Piazzolla returned to from Paris, where he had been studying, bringing with him his new style of music. Traditionalists were shocked by what they saw as a severing of the roots of tango and were afraid that tango would be lost along with the identity it signified. Riots broke out in musical halls; Piazzolla was even threatened with a gun during a radio interview on one occasion! Neither traditional tango nor tango nuevo were ever really in danger of dying out and today they both continue to thrive in a comfortable coexistence.

There's one more crucial character in the story of tango nuevo: José Bragato (born 1915). Bragato, originally born in Italy, immigrated to Argentina in his teens where he became an accomplished cellist. A fervent admirer of Piazzolla, they became close friends and worked together for many years. Bragato is credited with introducing cello into tango orchestras—which typically only included violin—and his work continues to be widely published and performed. Bragato was also an outspoken political activist, which unfortunately, resulted in many years of exile. Today he has returned to Argentina and resides in Buenos Aires.

Philip Hansen, originally from California, has been with the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra since 2004 and is a great asset! He was educated throughout the US, and has performed to acclaim both in orchestras and as a soloist: the Los Angeles Times praised his "admirable virtuosity" and Pulitzer Prize-winning composer David del Tredici said, "Phil Hansen brings virtuosity and élan to all that he plays." Currently, in this off-season, he is teaching in France. During the rest of the year, in addition to CPO performances, you can find Hansen conducting for the J. S. Bach Society.

Hansen had a close call shortly after coming to Calgary when he broke his arm in a bike accident in 2005. Not immediately realizing that the tumble gave him a hairline fracture, he continued to play with a broken arm until he simply couldn't continue, and eventually had to sit out the season. Fortunately for us, he made a full recovery.

Through his career Hansen has developed a passion for Asian and Latin American cello music, and has committed himself to bringing them to North American audiences—naturally José Bragato drew his attention. In 2005, Hansen was able to visit Bragato with his colleagues who also appear on his recent CD: "The trip was a joyful and surprising adventure. During our time with the Maestro, he shared with us what turned out to be a gold mine of original compositions as well as arrangements of music by Piazzolla among others."

And so we have *Bragatissimo*—a remarkable collection of pieces composed or arranged by Bragato, including the premier recording release of two Piazzolla compositions. Also playing on the album are Mika Sunago, a pianist from São Paulo, Brazil, and Erin Furbee, a pianist with the Oregon Symphony Orchestra; both women have an accomplished history of tango performance.

Bragatissimo has everything that you could want in recording—historical relevance, local and international relevance, world-class composers, arrangements, performers—even Hansen's cello, made in 1780 by Lockey Hill, is worth of note. Most significantly, it gives those of us who haven't had the opportunity to visit South America, a glimpse of a passionate and nuanced culture through a sound that we might not have encountered before.

Bragatissimo is available from Classics Plus in Calgary, and from North Pacific Music at northpacificmusic.com. ▼

Sean McLennan is a native Calgarian with (nearly) a PhD in Linguistics and Cognitive Science from Indiana University, where he was heavily involved in GLBT education. He currently has a full time gig in software for mobile technology.

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