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DAVID BAZEMORE PHOTOS

The tango, in which couples intensely stare into one another's eyes, was born in the urban slums of Argentina.

## **Tango takes the town**

FESTIVAL PROMISES 10 DAYS OF MUSIC, DANCING - AND PASSION

By Tom Jacobs  
NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

Tango is a term that conjures specific images and emotions. Passion. Sensuality. Couples intensely staring into one another's eyes as they glide across a dance floor, their precisely timed movements matching the music's distinctive rhythms.

It is, in a sense, the South American version of the Viennese waltz - a dance that grew so popular it came to epitomize a culture. And like the waltz, it has been appropriated by

composers and choreographers who have used it to create fine art.

Tango in both its high-art and populist form will be seen, heard and experienced for the next 10 days throughout Santa Barbara. The city's first Tango and Malambo Festival will incorporate performances by the Santa Barbara Symphony and State Street Ballet, as well as film screenings, panel discussions and - needless to say - tango lessons and dances.

"I'm not in a didactic mood with this," insisted Gisèle Ben-Dor, music director of the Santa Barbara Symphony and the festival's artistic director. "I'm not trying to teach anybody anything. I'm presenting first-rate art. People are going to hear things they've never heard before."

The festival officially celebrates both the tango (which was born in the urban slums of Argentina) and the malambo (the rural folk music and dance of the region). "The idea was to show two sides of the same culture: the city and the country," Ben-Dor said.

The malambo portion of the festival is largely confined to the State Street Ballet's performances this weekend (see related story). The bulk of the 10-day festival will focus on the tango, culminating with the Santa Barbara Symphony's "Soul of the Tango" concert Feb. 14 and 15. It will feature music of composers who incorporate the spirit of tango into their works, much the way Gershwin injected the flavor of jazz into his Piano Concerto and "Rhapsody in Blue."

Indeed, there are many parallels between jazz and the tango. Tango was born a bit earlier; its origins have been traced to the 1880s. But like jazz, it combined elements from a number of cultures, including European, African and (in the case of tango) Caribbean. Also like jazz, it was initially performed in less than prestigious venues.

"It was born in the brothels of Buenos Aires and around Montevideo," said Kristin Wendland, a tango scholar who teaches at Emory University in Atlanta. "It was danced by the *compadritos*, who were basically hoodlums. By the first decade of the (20th) century, tangos were being played in local cafes and dance halls.

"The big explosion in tango happened when it was exported to Paris," she added. "By 1913, there was tangomania in Paris! There's another analogy to jazz, which went to Europe, was cleansed a little bit, and then was embraced by the upper classes (in its home country). The same thing happened with tango. It had to be gentrified a little bit. By the 1930s, it was the most popular form in Argentina. Everybody danced it, across class lines."

Tango orchestras, the equivalent to American big bands, were hugely popular in Argentina in the 1930s, '40s and '50s, according to Wendland. But then - in yet another parallel to jazz - composers started writing more complex tango music, which was more suited to listening than dancing. Primary among them was Piazzolla, who can be considered the Duke Ellington of the tango (or perhaps the Charlie Parker). As a very

young man in Argentina, he was awarded a scholarship to go to Paris and study with the legendary Nadia Boulanger, the teacher of such great composers as Aaron Copland. "He showed her a suitcase full of his serious compositions," said Ben-Dor. "She read through them and said they lacked feeling."

Boulanger's advice to her pupil was to return to his roots.

"She said, 'You're an Argentine. Write tangos,' " Wendland said. "He had always played them, but never thought they were worthy of being art music. Boulanger gave him the permission and encouragement to explore them.

"That's when he found his voice. He took elements of tango and raised them to a whole different artistic level."

Piazzolla's "nuevo tango" approach, not unlike bebop in the United States, was condemned by traditionalists who didn't understand it and complained they couldn't dance to it. "It was almost like he was desecrating the flag," Ben-Dor said. But for all the criticism he received at home, Piazzolla encountered more and more enthusiasm overseas. He started collaborating with jazz artists Gerry Mulligan and Gary Burton, introducing tango to a whole new audience.

In the years following his death in 1992, Piazzolla has also been embraced by the classical music world. Superstar cellist Yo-Yo Ma made a Grammy-winning CD of his tango-influenced compositions and violinist/conductor Gidon Kremer has recorded and performed a number of Piazzolla's works. In a sense, his early ambition to make it as a classical composer ultimately was realized, albeit posthumously.

The Santa Barbara Symphony's Feb. 14-15 program includes an orchestral transcription of one of Piazzolla's most famous compositions, "Adios, Nonino," a mournful work written in the wake of his father's death. It also features the U.S. premiere of his 1953 piece "Buenos Aires: Tres Movimientos Sinfonicos," which the orchestra will subsequently record.

The concert will also include a world premiere by Academy Award-winning Argentine composer Luis Bacalov: The Triple Concerto for Piano, Soprano and Bandoneón. The latter instrument, which is the primary voice in most tango compositions, is "basically a button accordion," according to Wendland. "There are 70-some buttons. It's a German instrument, probably invented in the 1830s.

"It was used as a traveling organ in small churches in Germany. It also made its way into folk music. Somehow it arrived in Argentina on an immigrant ship. Nobody knows how it became the center of the tango orchestra.

"It's very expressive," she added. "In the hands of a good player, it sounds like a human voice. It has a very warm, very sensual quality."

"It's a very soulful instrument," added Ben-Dor. "The bandoneón is an instrument that cries."

Over the next 10 days, its distinctive cry will be heard from Paseo Nuevo to the UCSB campus, and many places in between. The festival, which was organized by the nonprofit Ben-Dor Music Discovery Project, has a budget of approximately \$80,000. Aside from a \$6,000 grant from the city of Santa Barbara, the money was raised privately, with major gifts from Merrill Lynch and Sofia Picon.

The Tango and Malambo Festival is a highly personal project for Ben-Dor, who recently announced she is stepping down as music director of the Santa Barbara Symphony. Born into a Jewish family that fled Europe to escape the Nazis, she grew up in Uruguay, which shares a common culture with neighboring Argentina. As symphony audiences know, she has long championed the art music of her native continent; this festival allows her to take that commitment a step further.

"If I were a Russian conductor, I would do a Russian festival," she said. "If I were a French conductor, I would do a French festival.

"Well, why not Latin America?"

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## SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

Here is a calendar of events for the 10-day Tango and Malambo Festival. For general festival information, call 568-5996 or go to [www.tangofestival.net](http://www.tangofestival.net) on the Web.

### TODAY

Opening gala, with dancers Sandor and Parissa. 5 p.m. Bryant and Sons Jewelers, 812 State St. \$100. 898-9386.

### SATURDAY

Tango lessons. 2 to 5 p.m., Paseo Nuevo. Repeated at 2 p.m. Feb. 14. Free.

"Tango," a film by Carlos Saura, presented by the Santa Barbara International Film Festival. 4 p.m. Metro 4, 618 State St. \$8.50. 963-4408.

State Street Ballet. 8 p.m., Lobero Theatre, 33 E. Canon Perdido St. Repeated 2 p.m. Sunday. \$20 to \$42.50. 963-0761.

### SUNDAY

"Exiles of Cordel," presented by Santa Barbara International Film Festival. 7 p.m. Metro



DAVID BAZEMORE  
Santa Barbara Symphony music director and the festival's artistic director is Gisele Ben-Dor.

4. \$8.50. 963-4408.

### **MONDAY**

"Tango: The Obsession," film followed by live tango demonstration. Presented by UCSB Arts & Lectures. 7:30 p.m. UCSB Campbell Hall. \$6. 893-3535.

### **TUESDAY**

"Dances of the Americas," Santa Barbara Symphony Concert for Young People. 11:30 a.m. Arlington Theatre, 1317 State St. Free.

Conversation: "The Tango Phenomenon." Faulkner Gallery, downtown Public Library, 40 E. Anapamu St. 2 p.m. Free. 962-7653.

"Il Postino." 7:30 p.m. Riviera Theatre, 2044 Alameda Padre Serra. \$7. 963-9503.

### **WEDNESDAY**

Forum: "Tango." 2 p.m., Music and Ethnomusicology Room 1213, UCSB campus. Free. 893-3261.

Social dance. 9 to 11 p.m. Cafe Buenos Aires, 1316 State St. Free. 963-0242.

### **THURSDAY**

"The Story of Tango," narrated by bassist and tango scholar Pablo Aslan, featuring dancers Sandor and Parissa. 8 p.m. UCSB Lotte Lehmann Concert Hall. \$12 general or \$7 students. Sponsored by UCSB Music Department. 893-7001.

Live tango band (no cover charge). 5 to 7 p.m. El Paseo Restaurant. 962-6050. Also 9:30 p.m. to midnight, Bogart's Cafe, 1114 State St. 965-8001.

### **FEB. 13**

Live tango dance band. 9 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. SOhO, 1221 State St. \$5 cover charge. 962-7776.

### **FEB. 14**

Santa Barbara Symphony "Soul of Tango" program. 8 p.m. Arlington Theatre. Repeated at 3 p.m. Feb. 15. \$23 to \$48. 963-4408.

### **FEB. 15**

Live tango band. Noon to 4 p.m. Borders Books and Music, 900 State St. Free. 899-3668.