



From the Top at Carnegie Hall
Episode 2: "Family Ties"
Airing on PBS (check local TV listings)
Available online at pbs.org

Learning Activity

Title: *Mad Hot Tango!*

Description: In this activity students will listen to and analyze characteristics of tango music, especially rhythm, and experiment with variations in tempo.

Grade Level: 9-12

National Music Standard: 6, Listening to, analyzing, and describing music

Background

In this episode violinist **Caeli Smith** plays a wonderful movement from Astor Piazzolla's *L'histoire du tango* (The history of the tango), called "Bordel 1900." Originally written for flute and guitar, this version was arranged for violin and piano by Tim Ribchester. In the rehearsal scene, we see Caeli and Chris O'Riley working with Pablo Ziegler, a pianist who collaborated with Piazzolla for many years and carries on his musical legacy.



Caeli Smith and Christopher O'Riley on stage at Carnegie Hall

Astor Piazzolla was a major influence on the development of the tango style during his long career, which began in the 1930's and ended at his death in 1992. Born in Argentina to Italian immigrant parents in 1921, he was playing tango music and composing by the time he was in his late teens. The tango originated in the dance halls of Buenos Aires in the late 19th century and

was a well-established and beloved hallmark of Argentinean popular music by the time Piazzolla began his career. But Piazzolla's great musical curiosity and versatility (he also composed in classical and jazz styles) drew him to experiment with the "classic" tango form (to the dismay of some purists!). In 1953 he won a prestigious competition for composers and went to Paris to study with the great teacher Nadia Boulanger. She recognized his unique musical vision and encouraged him to express it. The result was *nuevo tango*, music that incorporated classical and jazz elements into the tango form, drawing musicians and music lovers of many tastes into its spell.

Materials

Television or computer, DVD player, video of Episode 2, pencils, paper

Activity Instructions

1) Begin by **brainstorming** different types of rhythm that students are familiar with. Which of these are especially associated with dancing? Examples: *waltz* (see the Chopin Waltz in C# minor at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wN2XskFv7w>) and *merengue* (performed by Furia, an Australian Latin band, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34R2xqyDhks>). Explain the meaning of syncopation (a stress on a normally unstressed beat, or no stress where one is expected), and see if any of the rhythmic examples students have identified contain syncopation. Classical music often contains syncopated rhythms, as do jazz and popular music (such as George Gershwin's "Fascinating Rhythm" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3IULYkfk7RE>).

2) **Listen** to "Bordel 1900" and identify two or three rhythmic patterns that are repeated frequently. One example is the syncopation that begins at measure 64.

The image displays a musical score for 'Bordel 1900'. The top staff is a single melodic line in treble clef, starting with a dynamic marking of *mf*. It features a triplet of eighth notes followed by a series of eighth notes with accents (>) and a syncopated pattern. The bottom staff consists of two parts: a bass line in bass clef and a piano accompaniment in treble clef. The piano part features a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The bass line has a similar eighth-note pattern. The score is set in a key with one sharp (F#) and a 2/4 time signature.

Score courtesy of Editions Henry Lemoine, used by permission

3) **Divide** students into small groups of 4 or 5. Have them clap or tap the patterns they hear. Try speeding them up and slowing them down. How does that affect the impact of the rhythm? Ask them to identify the *meter/time signature* and the *tempo* of the pattern they have identified.

4) **Discuss** how repetition, syncopation, and other metric variations affect the mood and impact of the music. How do you think tango music and tango dancing affect each other?

Find out more!

About Caeli Smith

In addition to being a serious violinist, Caeli Smith is one of From the Top's Roving Reporters, producing audio interviews for the radio show and writing for From the Top's monthly newsletter. To read more about Caeli, hear her radio show performances, and read her articles, visit From the Top's web site:

<http://www.fromthetop.org/Programs/Cast.cfm?pid=2105>

About tango

To hear this piece in its **original instrumentation (for flute and guitar)**, watch the excellent video of a performance by Dawn Weiss (flute) and John Mery (guitar) on YouTube. The professionally produced video includes a pair of tango dancers:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fb2crACXe7w>

You can also see Caeli playing with **Tim Ribchester**, who arranged the version that is played on the show:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZFbKX_7HME&feature=related

To watch **Piazzolla in performance with cellist Yo Yo Ma**, visit:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMgVMxG95A>

And just for fun, watch the documentary movie about New York City public school students in a city-wide ballroom dance competition, **Mat Hot Ballroom** (available on DVD).

About Astor Piazzolla

A comprehensive **biography of Piazzolla** in English is *Le Grand Tango: The Life and Music of Astor Piazzolla*, by Maria Susana Azzi and Simon Collier (Oxford University Press, USA, 2000, ISBN-10: 0195127773).

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Foundation funding provided by



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Additional funding by
Helen and Peter Bing
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