

MUSIC REVIEW

The Sound of Tango, the Story of Mary

‘María de Buenos Aires,’ by Piazzolla, at Le Poisson Rouge



María de Buenos Aires The singer Solange Merdinian, at center in veil, as María in this “operita” by Astor Piazzolla, performed on Friday at Le Poisson Rouge.

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Published: March 19, 2013

There was no piano in Astor Piazzolla’s vacation home in Parque del Plata, Uruguay, where he spent the summer of 1968 working with the poet Horacio Ferrer on an operita, a “little opera,” so he composed on the bandoneón. The resulting work, “María de Buenos Aires,” is an intense cocktail of poetry, tango music and dance that is performed by a folk contralto, an operatic baritone and one male actor. But it’s the fourth voice — the bandoneón, the soulful South American accordion — that calls the shots and, to borrow Ferrer’s words, “burns in the back of your throat.”

It was appropriate, then — and a sign of the substantial Argentine contingent among the capacity audience in [Le Poisson Rouge](#) on Friday evening — that the applause at the end

of [Opera Hispánica](#)'s production of "María" was loudest for the bandoneónist J P [Jofre](#), who took his bow last. The production, directed by Beth Greenberg, was billed as the first fully staged one to be presented by Opera Hispánica, which is now in its third season. Most of the nightclub's narrow stage, however, was taken up by the excellent nine-member band, conducted by Jorge Parodi, leaving the singers and dancers to stalk one another on just a few claustrophobic square feet of space.

But then, it's in the nature of tango to express oversize passions with a rigorous economy of gesture. And despite its limitations, Opera Hispánica's production was an elegant tribute to Piazzolla's and Ferrer's ability to combine music, movement and words of hallucinatory power in a concentrated format that is as pungent and stimulating as a cup of espresso.

The work is more of an oratorio than an opera. Written in the key of "Ay! minor" (Ferrer's libretto is laced with musical puns), it's a Passion play in which the central character, María, represents both Jesus and the Virgin. She sleepwalks through scenes of sexual violence, her burial and dreamlike confessions to a chorus of psychoanalysts until, resurrected, she gives birth to a new version of herself.

Piazzolla wrote the part of María for a folk singer. Here it was performed by the Argentine mezzo [Solange Merdinian](#), who possesses a smoldering stage presence as well as the gutter-scraping low range required for the part. The natural directness of her tone — all performers were amplified — blended surprisingly well with the idealistic pathos of Marcelo Guzzo, who sang multiple roles in a smooth baritone.

The Argentine actor Gerardo Gudiño delivered the spoken part of El Duende with hammed-up menace, wielding Ferrer's startling metaphors like daggers.

A version of this review appeared in print on March 20, 2013, on page C6 of the New York edition with the headline: The Sound Of Tango, The Story Of Mary.