

About this Recording

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[GP794](#) - Piano Recital: Shybayeva, Hanna - AHARONIÁN, C. / BABBITT, M. / BERKMAN, R. / BISCARDI, C. / FENNELLY, B. / FINCH, D. (Tangos for Yvar)

[English](#) [German](#)

TANGOS FOR YVAR—THE INTERNATIONAL TANGO COLLECTION

Yvar-Emilian Mikhashoff (1941–1993) was an American pianist, born in Troy, New York. He was a prominent performer of contemporary piano music and worked closely with composers all over the world. He also had a career as a ballroom dancer from 1962 to 1965. Mikhashoff collaborated with the publishing house Quadrivium Press to commission composers from all over the world to write piano pieces based on the tango dance form. Mikhashoff's brief but rewarding career as a ballroom dancer was the impetus for focusing the project on the tango and composers were enthusiastic to contribute to this collection. Eighty-eight tangos by composers from 30 countries were officially premiered on 14 April 1985 at the North American New Music Festival. Mikhashoff toured internationally performing the tangos, and he commissioned 127 in total, but some are considered to be lost or were possibly never completed by their respective composers. In addition to the pieces recorded here, the collection includes tangos by composers including Anthony Burgess, John Cage, Aaron Copland, Oliver Knussen, Michael Finnissy, Poul Ruders and Karlheinz Stockhausen. It was intended that the tangos be published in a multi-volume set by Quadrivium Press. However, the publication was never issued. The tango collection is held by the Music Library of the State University at Buffalo, New York, USA.

ABOUT YVAR-EMILIAN MIKHASHOFF

Yvar-Emilian Mikhashoff was born Ronald MacKay but he later adopted his grandfather's name. He studied at the Eastman School of Music in 1959 and in 1961 he studied piano at The Juilliard School in New York City. In 1964 Mikhashoff entered the University of Houston, where he earned a B.M. in 1967 and a M.M. in composition in 1968. Receiving a Fulbright Scholarship, he studied the music of the French Impressionists with Nadia Boulanger. After his return to the United States, Mikhashoff earned a Doctor of Musical Arts from the University of Texas at Austin in August 1973. In the fall of 1973 Mikhashoff was appointed Assistant Professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Based in Buffalo until his death in 1993, Mikhashoff had an international performing career which led him to promote new music and American music around the world. He was considered one of the leading performers of contemporary piano music of his day. He worked closely with composers all over the world, including leading figures like John Cage, Morton Feldman, Giacinto Scelsi, Per Nørgård, Poul Ruders, Conlon Nancarrow, Sylvano Bussotti and numerous others.

HANNA SHYBAYEVA TALKS TO CARSTEN DÜRER ABOUT YVAR'S TANGOS

What do you find interesting about tango music, as a pianist?

My interest in this music is of course a very personal one—it's a very specific style of music and dance. I was always passionate about listening to tangos—and as a musician, you then always want to play that music yourself—in my case, on the piano. So I started looking around for what tango music there was available for the piano. What's more, the tango offers an interesting combination of different dance styles, which are generally rather unclear. The origins of tango music lie in the waltz and the mazurka, as well as other styles—and these are both dances strongly represented in piano music. So I was interested in the extent to which these elements can be heard today in the music of tango composers. In the meantime an abundance of new stylistic elements have become incorporated into this music—jazz and electronic music for example. These origins are most obvious when listening to traditional tango orchestras, when it becomes clear that the waltz and the mazurka are key elements in this music.

And it was in the course of your search for tango music for the piano that you came across the selection of tangos for Yvar Mikhashoff?

That's correct. I looked for tango compositions that had been originally written for the piano and in the process came across this collection, which was supposed to be kept in the library of the State University of New York in Buffalo. I found countless tango pieces for piano in this collection by composers some of whom I had never heard of before. So I investigated some more and learnt that the pianist Yvar Mikhashoff, born in 1941 and most recently active as a teacher of the University of Buffalo, had commissioned 127 composers to write tangos for him. This was between 1983 and 1991. Of course, I knew some of the famous names he had asked, like Aaron Copland, Karlheinz Stockhausen and Frederic Rzewski. I felt as though I had hit upon a goldmine. So I spoke to the library to find out how I could get hold of the music. The staff were really helpful: they only had some of the works in sheet music or manuscript form, but they sent me what they had and put me in direct contact with some of the composers. And so began a lengthy phase of research—I spent two years trying to get hold of the scores. This wasn't easy, since some of the composers were already dead. I spoke to family members, publishers' agents and so on.

How many tangos were you able to put together in the end?

Apparently Yvar had actually intended to publish the scores of the entire collection—he had presumably come to an agreement with a publisher about it. But all this never came to fruition, as he died in 1993, at the age of just 52. The curious thing was that many composers had assumed that their music would be published by Yvar and so had never approached their own publisher, or indeed anyone else, with a view to getting their tangos published. As a result, some

of these works can no longer be tracked down, it seems. I now have 70 of the tangos in sheet music form. But some—of this I'm certain—will never be found, I'm afraid.

Did all 127 composers come up with a tango?

It seems not. Some of them seem never to have written a tango or sent one to Yvar, even though they appear in the list of composers he commissioned. I also had the impression that some of these tangos had already been written and were parts of other cycles that the composers then simply sent on to Yvar. But the majority were written specially for him. And the list of composers is truly international, even if the majority are from the US, UK and Canada. Only Asian composers are missing from the list, which no doubt also has to do with the timescale for the commissions.

Yvar Mikhashoff also recorded some of these works. Is that correct?

Yes. It even seems that he was an enthusiastic dancer—as a young man he had already pursued a so-called 'ballroom' career. He was also a specialist in contemporary piano music and did his best to promote it. These tangos were just one of many projects that he initiated in new music. Yvar then indeed gave the first performance of 88 of these tangos. He then recorded an album called *Incitation to Desire*, named after one of the tangos by Chester Biscardi, which I also play here. He gave the premiere of 19 of the tangos on this album. He probably wanted to record more, but then died prematurely.

How did you make your final selection of tangos for this album, from the 70 you had to choose from?

This was very difficult, all the more so because of the huge diversity of the works. It was a real challenge to find the right variety—with the thought at the back of my mind that there might be further albums to come. You need to find a careful blend of moods and compositional styles—but I managed to come to a decision, and I really like every one of the tangos I have recorded here.

Given that you play so much contemporary chamber music, you are well acquainted with modern styles of composition. Were you still often surprised at what you encountered here?

Absolutely! In fact, almost every conceivable style can be found in this collection. It was a thrilling experience to see how the composers interpreted the concept of the tango and shaped that concept into a musical work. Often this proved completely unexpected. Some pieces are composed in an entirely minimalistic fashion, like Tom Johnson's tango, which is organised around a single theme over the course of four minutes. The tango element is found here in the left hand, which plays the typical habanera theme. Or the piece by Jackson Hill, entitled *Tango no Tango* – dedicated to a Japanese festival known as Tango but which is in actual fact a celebration of flags that takes place every May in Japan—it both is and isn't a tango. We can see yet another style in Milton Babbitt's tango, written using the twelve-tone method: you can only tell that it is indeed supposed to be a tango by its rhythmic structure.

Others again are written in a completely traditional style. You might think that in the 1980s all the composers would have been looking to write something new. But many went back to the roots of the tango and wrote delightful, very traditional tangos.

At the end of the album there is one more tango that is not part of the collection: Astor Piazzolla's *Libertango*. Why?

Yes. This is surely the most famous piece of tango music in the world—the bonus track on this album. When I first got interested in music for tango on the piano, I couldn't get away from Astor Piazzolla, of course. And you want to play Piazzolla anyway, because it's such wonderful music! *Libertango* is mostly played by ensembles, or in a variety of different combinations—there is scarcely an instrument for which no transcription of this music exists. I wanted to make a version for solo piano. As a basis I took a transcription for two pianos probably made by Pablo Ziegler, who played with Piazzolla for many years. I've often played my own version over the years, but never written it down—which makes it a constantly changing and partially improvised piece.

I would also say that this tango by Piazzolla is a kind of homage to Yvar—he made arrangements of a great many Piazzolla works for piano himself. And it brings the programme of this album full circle.

Carsten Dürer

Translation: Saul Lipetz