

Dino Saluzzi

Chris Moss explores the career of the veteran Argentinian *bandoneón* maestro whose reworkings of tango and native folk music are cerebral yet sonorous



Juan Hitters/ECM Records

Sometimes, even in summer, even in the vivacious, subtropical heights of the Argentinian Andes, even when you feel high and rather excitable, you need a little cool air and some calm. Dino Saluzzi is the man to turn to. Arguably the world's best living *bandoneón* player, he has steadily offered up album after album of sublime, cerebral reshapings of his native tango and folk genres. A stalwart of jazz label ECM, he has earned a place alongside the likes of Pat Metheny and Keith Jarrett, garnering acclaim across Europe's avant-garde music scene and among more traditional Argentinian aficionados.

Saluzzi was born in the village of Campo Santo in Salta, north-western Argentina in 1935. A mountainous region of multi-hued canyons and wine-loving microclimates, it's the frontier between the Andean high plains, where indigenous culture persists, and the more Westernised towns and cities of the central pampas. "My father worked on a sugar plantation, and, in his free time, he played the *bandoneón* and studied tango and folkloric music," he says, with characteristic humility. In fact, his father Cayetano was a renowned multi-instrumentalist and composer. "There weren't books, or schools, or radio – nothing. Nevertheless, my father was able to transmit a musical education to me; music that, later, when I was studying, I realised that I already knew – not from the point of view of reason or rationality, but rather in a different way, a strange way, the way that is produced by oral transmission."

This kind of osmosis might account for Saluzzi's earthy, natural flair for melody and harmony. Thanks to this oral tradition, Argentina's folk scene has produced many dynasties and musical families; on many releases, Saluzzi has shared the bill with his brothers, Celso, also a *bandoneón* player and Félix, a clarinetist and composer. Nephew Matías plays bass on some numbers. His son José María, a guitarist, has been playing with him since the age of 13.

Saluzzi began playing professionally while studying in Buenos Aires. In 1956, he returned to Salta to concentrate on composition, fusing his classical training with folk elements. Along the way, he met musicians leading the so-called *Guardia Nueva* (New Guard) of tango. One was Astor Piazzolla, already developing the astringent, angular sound that he would baptise *tango nuevo*. Saluzzi shared Piazzolla's willingness to take risks. He soon began his own mission to forge a new, post-

modern folk hybrid that was complex, considered and crafted for the concert hall rather than the dance salon.



In 1982, Manfred Eicher signed Saluzzi to his ECM label. His first release, *Kultrum*, builds virtual landscapes with mountains of sound. *Volver* (1986) showcased ambitious, but accessible new tangos. *Andina* (1988) is pared down yet broodingly powerful, Saluzzi playing *bandoneón* and flute all alone. *Mojotero* (1991)

rolls out the family virtuosi and jazzes up the arrangements. Later albums are mellow meditations on folk and tango, or the memory of these. *Responsorium* (2003) – the churchy title is telling – suggests the dance is over, the ballroom and the barn closed down, but the motifs, moods and ritual value of the music remain pertinent.

Saluzzi developed relationships with several label-mates, including Tomasz Stańko, Palle Danielsson, Jon Christensen and the Rosamunde Quartett (with whom he released another album titled, confusingly, *Kultrum*, in 1998). He has contributed to films, including Jean-Luc Godard's *Nouvelle Vague* (1990) and Pedro Almodóvar's *All About My Mother* (1999). "Music is implicit in all people," says Saluzzi. "It's just that musicians are those who bring it out, because they know a way to give it body and form... If you're authentic and open to receiving influences from your surroundings, surely you'll express your surroundings."

Which takes us back, always, and again, to Campo Santo. Saluzzi is a quiet man, but he speaks – through those bellows – fluently and heartbreakingly of family and history, of indigenous peoples, of the strife of Argentina, of the seasons and the sowing and the sorrow of exile. At his most experimental, he remains grounded, real, rooted. ♦

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"Music is implicit in all people"

BEST ALBUMS

RCA Victor 100 Años (RCA Victor, 2001)
Saluzzi's early vinyls are hard to get, so this 18-track sampler of his pre-ECM days is a fine substitute. Sweet melodies and lulling rhythms show off his folksier, simpler side, and the selection concludes with a stirring cover of 'El Condor Pasa'.

Kultrum (ECM, 1983)
His ECM debut is unashamedly experimental, opening with the almost ten-minute long 'Kultrum Pampa (Introducción y Malambo)', which juxtaposes eerie chants and a plaintive *bandoneón* caught somewhere between tango and *chamamé*, city and sierra.

Dino Saluzzi Group Mojotero (ECM, 1991)
A family album featuring two brothers and a son, this is one of Saluzzi's jazziest releases, and one of his most beautiful. The communication between musicians is quite extraordinary, with Dino quietly guiding the pulsating beat and chiming chords that rise only to dissolve.

Dino Saluzzi & Jon Christensen Senderos (ECM, 2005)
Nouns elemental and abstract feature prominently in the titles of this daring, deeply felt album. Joined by Norwegian percussionist Jon Christensen, Saluzzi pushes the envelope, testing silences, stretching geometries. Reviewed in #31.

Dino Saluzzi Group Valle de la Infancia (ECM, 2014)
A reflective mood is lightened by brother Félix's spirited clarinet; Quintino Cinalli's percussion anchors the more ethereal shapes. Songs like 'Churqui' and 'La Fiesta Popular', rooted in the Andean uplands, distil the folk spirit of Mercedes Sosa and Atahualpa Yupanqui. Reviewed in #102.

IF YOU LIKE DINO SALUZZI, TRY:

Eduardo Rovira Sonico (Acqua Records, 1997)
Rovira (1925-1980) is overlooked due to Piazzolla's overarching prominence and because he died relatively young, but his *bandoneón* playing is bewitchingly leftfield. Distortion, artful discord and supreme delicacy are showcased here.