

**Daisaku Ikeda's Recollections of World Figures**  
**Osvaldo Pugliese —**  
**Venerable Maestro of Argentine Tango**

MY fingers are as hard as nails. I'm just a carpenter, hammering away at the piano keys" — this is the spirit of the maestro of Argentine tango. I like people who are completely devoted to their chosen vocation. Osvaldo Pugliese is tango incarnate. In December of this year [1995], he will be ninety years old. His life has been inseparably intertwined with tango's century-old history.

To my question, "What is tango?" Mr. Pugliese replies: "It is the folk music of the Argentine people, born from their hearts. It was first heard in the lower class districts near Buenos Aires, and for a time it was regarded as indecent and disreputable. But the people took it into their hearts, and there it put down deep roots. Today, it is our national music, and it is loved equally by audiences in Argentina and abroad."

For a period after World War II, tango enjoyed a boom in Japan as well, and in Tokyo alone there were dozens of "tango coffee shops" — even in Kanda, the area where the old Soka Gakkai Headquarters was located. The annual Tango Concert Series, which began in 1970 under the sponsorship of the Min-On Concert Association, has been popular in Japan for nearly a quarter of a century now. Mr. Pugliese has played a major role in elevating tango to an international art form.

The famous tango rhythm that reaches into the very core of our beings pulses vibrantly in Mr. Pugliese's veins. He was born in downtown Buenos Aires in 1905, among factories and cheap apartment buildings where female workers stricken with tuberculosis and poor immigrant families lived packed together. But the people were warm and affectionate, and gave free and unrestrained expression to the full gamut of human emotion — joy, anger, disappointment and sorrow.

HIS father, Adolfo, ran a bar, but he was also a flute player in a tango band. "My father took me everywhere with him, allowing me to absorb the diverse facets of the world of tango," recalls Mr. Pugliese. Tango — its poetry, its pathos, its longing for freedom, prayers for hope, joy in singing of sorrow; tango can express the laugh of a young maiden, the murmurs of men, the yearning for love and its warm comforts. Tango is wild, sophisticated, humorous, stylish, angry, beautiful and fierce. Its rhythms pulsate with an inexpressible melancholy, a mournful yearning for something that cannot be put into words.

Behind his serious, scholarly demeanor, Mr. Pugliese is a great ocean in which all these tumultuous waves of human experience surge. He once told the members of his orchestra: "We are sailing on the vast ocean of tango. The important thing is to know the ocean currents that will lead us to the harbor of the people's hearts.... Tango must always be interpreted in terms of human emotions. It has a human voice. That is why we must bring forth the sound that accurately expresses those emotions." This offers us a glimpse into the secret of Mr. Pugliese's long musical life. To always ask oneself: "What do people really want? What are they feeling in the depths of their hearts?" To humbly keep one's ears tuned to the times, listening until one can physically sense what people are feeling, and constantly striving to renew oneself until one becomes an instrument that plays in harmony with the voices of the people.

WE can't do the same thing we were doing ten years ago. We must always be thinking about tomorrow. We must always find something new," asserts Mr. Pugliese, who included a new composition even in his final concert tour before retiring from the stage [held in Japan and sponsored by the Min-On Concert Association in 1989]. Mr. Pugliese's musical career spanned seven decades, and his music has won the hearts of four generations of audiences — no small accomplishment in itself. The reason for this long-lived success had been his iron determination to stay in tune with the people's feelings, and his faith in the infinite creative richness of the people. "My greatest teacher has always been the people," he declares.

It is incorrect to divide artistic genres into elevated and vulgar arts. There are vulgar artists in the classical tradition, and extremely sophisticated and accomplished artists working in popular genres. Mr. Pugliese began by studying classical music. "My mother always encouraged my efforts. When I was practicing the piano, she would often stand by the door watching me with warm approval. One day, she made the chance remark of how wonderful it would be if I could perform some day at the Teatro Colón." The Teatro Colón [in Buenos Aires, Argentina] is one of the three great opera houses of the world. It is a palace to classical music, where only the finest artists in the world are invited to perform. "For us, poor as we were," says Mr. Pugliese, "to perform at the Teatro Colón seemed an improbable dream."

To support himself and his family, Mr. Pugliese switched from classical music to tango, and from the age of fifteen he began to earn his living as a professional musician. He started, he says, by playing the musical accompaniment to silent movies in theaters. "In those days, I would earn four pesos for playing all night in a cafe. The next morning I always gave my earnings to my mother," he remembers. After a long apprenticeship, he finally formed a band of his own in 1939, when he was thirty-three. He and the other band members worked persistently, even stubbornly, to create their own sound, and were finally rewarded with explosive popularity. In the meantime, popular orchestras that had just contented themselves with following the trend of the moment were disbanding one after another.

Mr. Pugliese was known as a demon for rehearsal. When you joined his orchestra, colleagues would say, your whole life was spent rehearsing and performing. The Argentine composer once spent three days getting two bars of music to his satisfaction. He was always the first to the auditorium, the first to begin rehearsing. His perfect technique and enthusiastic performances made him the symbol of the world of the tango.

He has always been devoted to learning. He read *Das Kapital*, the epic work by Karl Marx, while working at a printers. He studied music theory with the same thoroughness and dedication. For his communist sympathies, he was imprisoned several times, but he remained undefeated. In 1968, he faced a crisis when the members of his orchestra, which he had nurtured warmly for so many years, left him to establish a new group just before the orchestra's thirtieth anniversary. Everyone thought that Mr. Pugliese's career had come to an end. But he did not let this setback deter him. Within six months, he had launched a new orchestra. Everyone applauded the undaunted strength of the venerable maestro.

In 1985, an unforgettable event in the history of tango took place. Mr. Pugliese was invited to perform a tango recital at the Teatro Colón. Before the performance began, he was introduced to the audience in a poem:

A man of pure, uncompromising melody,  
A man of the slums and the skyscrapers,  
A man who wrote many of his compositions behind steel  
bars and under the cold gaze of surveillance,  
A man who brought the dawn with his songs that  
resound through our streets.

Now Pugliese will sit down at this piano  
At the request of the people.<sup>1</sup>

THE applause was thunderous. Mr. Pugliese greeted the audience. He had only one thing to say at this glorious moment. Nothing else came to mind. "To my mother, who loved music more than anything, this Teatro Colón was heaven." The dream of sixty-five years before had come true. It was a brilliant triumph, the victory of a man who had made his life among the people.

Mr. Pugliese is without ego. Though he was made an honorary citizen of Buenos Aires (1986) and was awarded the Culture Award by the French government (1988), among many other honors, what really made him happy was that now the once-scorned tango was properly appreciated.

The Argentine composer is also well known for instituting a union policy for the payment of his orchestra members, including himself, by which all shared fairly in the earnings. Since his retirement, he has sold his personal possessions to create a "House of Tango," dedicated to preserving the history and tradition of Argentine tango and teaching and fostering a new generation of musicians and performers to ensure its future.

When I visited Buenos Aires in 1993, not only did Mr. Pugliese come with his wife, Lidia, to greet me at the airport, but he agreed to perform at the Eleventh SGI World Youth Peace Culture Festival [held in the Argentine capital on February 18, 1993]. This itself was a major news event in Argentina, but people were astonished when he brought his entire orchestra to rehearse two days before the festival.

"I don't like to sit at home. I want to be out among people, creating something together with them," he once said. His action was in perfect accord with this credo. When his piano was delivered, the then eighty-seven-year-old Mr. Pugliese revealed his amazing youthfulness by trying to push it into place himself!

On the day of the festival, he played the piece he had written for me as a token of his friendship with Japan, "Tokio Luminoso" (Shining Tokyo). As we all applauded his vigorous performance, I recalled what he had said to me in Tokyo: "I want to work with you, President Ikeda, for peace. So that we do not repeat the tragedies of the past. I will fight. To the very end, to the moment of my death, I will fight for victory."

Mr. Pugliese there on the stage was a living example of his message for all young people: "Study, inquire, seek hard. Learn what life is, what life should be — this is what you must pursue." □

1. Minoru Kizuki, *Latina* (a Japanese music magazine), October 1988.