

Astor Piazzolla and the History of the Tango

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Most people are familiar with the term “tango,” and may even picture two serious-looking dancers with roses in their mouths when this term comes to mind. The tango has been incredibly internationalized and popularized, but in its original form, was an Argentine urban dance that developed during the 19th century.<sup>1</sup> A rich tango musical tradition developed alongside the popular dance, and today is named the national music of Argentina.<sup>2</sup> Through several main developmental phases, the tango was changed significantly over time. One of the most influential figures in the history of the tango, Astor Piazzolla, is credited with revitalizing the tango tradition in the 20th century. This paper will discuss the origin of the tango and its process of musical and cultural development, as well as the life of Astor Piazzolla and his particular influence on this genre.

### Beginnings

Many scholars disagree about the exact roots from which the tango was born. The etymology of the word itself is highly debated: some say it comes from African or Castilian origin, while others suggest that it was derived from the Spanish word *tañer*, meaning “to play an instrument.”<sup>3</sup> Other scholars claim different origins still, including Gypsy and Cuban roots.<sup>4</sup>

Whatever has been debated about its exact beginnings, however, it is generally accepted that the tango was born in the slums or *barrios* of Buenos Aires, primarily among immigrant

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<sup>1</sup> Gerard Béhague, “Tango,” *Oxford Music Online*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Goerzten, and María Susana Azzi, “Globalization and the Tango,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 1999, no. 31: 67-76.

<sup>3</sup> Béhague, “Tango,” 1.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Powers, “Tango (ii),” *Oxford Music Online*, (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2019), 1.

populations.<sup>5</sup> People from all over the world came to Argentina seeking a more prosperous living environment in in the mid-19th century, and settled there from countries such as Spain, Italy, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Russia, and other central European countries.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, living in slums on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, many immigrants did not have access to the economic progress of the city and instead became residents of a *conventillo* or tenement house.<sup>7</sup> It was in these tenement houses that a mixing of various music and dancing traditions from dozens of cultures led to the creation of the tango.<sup>8</sup>

### Guardia Vieja

The musical and cultural development of the tango is commonly split up into three main eras, the first of which being the *guardia vieja*, or “old guard.”<sup>9</sup> This period lasted from its birth until the mid-1910s, and it was in this time frame that the tango first received international fame.<sup>10</sup> At first, the wealthier residents living in inner Buenos Aires turned their noses up at the tango, as it was a thing from the slums, and for the slums.<sup>11</sup> However, by the break of the 20th century, the tango had moved from the slums into downtown cafés, and jumped across the ocean to achieve immense popularity in Paris, Rome, and Tokyo.<sup>12</sup> The international endorsement led

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<sup>5</sup> Powers, “Tango (ii),” 1.

<sup>6</sup> I-Ching Tsai, “The Evolution of the tango and Astor Piazzolla’s Tango Nuevo,” PhD diss., (Claremont Graduate University, 2005), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Tsai, “The Evolution of the tango and Astor Piazzolla’s Tango Nuevo,” 7.

<sup>8</sup> Tsai, “The Evolution of the tango and Astor Piazzolla’s Tango Nuevo,” 7.

<sup>9</sup> Goerzten, “Globalization and the Tango,” 67.

<sup>10</sup> Goerzten, “Globalization and the Tango,” 67.

<sup>11</sup> Powers, “Tango (ii),” 1.

<sup>12</sup> Goerzten, “Globalization and the Tango,” 67.

to increased acceptance back home in Argentina, and the “home tango” there began to develop along with the “tango for export” that had captured the hearts of many around the globe.<sup>13</sup>

The tango had a specific musical disposition in Argentina in the *guardia vieja*. Generally, tangos from this era were written in a duple meter and a tripartite form, and were performed by *tercetos*, or trios, the included violin, flute, and either guitar or accordion.<sup>14</sup> A standardized ensemble called the *orquesta típica* was also common, and included two violins, two bandoneons, a piano, and bass.<sup>15</sup> When the tango spread to Europe and beyond, however, the music was typically arranged for dance orchestras of between twelve and sixteen musicians.<sup>16</sup>

### Guardia Nueva

Starting in the early twentieth century, tango hit a new spike in popularity. In Europe, it began to spread outside of Paris and London, and went to further countries like Finland where it became the central folk dance.<sup>17</sup> European influence “sanitized” the tango, which lacked the fierce facial expression of the original dance, was immensely popular in the cafés and tea rooms of London and Paris.<sup>18</sup> This version also had direct influence on what is now danced as the tango in the American ballroom dancing world, although the smoldering look and aggressive attitude was brought into this particular strand along the way.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Goerzten, “Globalization and the Tango,” 68.

<sup>14</sup> Béhague, “Tango,” 2.

<sup>15</sup> Powers, “Tango (ii),” 1.

<sup>16</sup> Powers, “Tango (ii),” 1.

<sup>17</sup> Goerzten, “Globalization and the Tango,” 69.

<sup>18</sup> Goerzten, “Globalization and the Tango,” 69.

<sup>19</sup> Goerzten, “Globalization and the Tango,” 69.

Back in Argentina, Carlos Gardel (1887-1935) won the heart of the nation by transforming the tango from strictly a dance to a song of extreme cultural significance.<sup>20</sup> Gardel sang tango ballads while wearing night club attire that linked Buenos Aires with European fashion.<sup>21</sup> While European popularization helped, Carlos Gardel was also a main figure in the growing acceptance and love of the tango genre within the upper classes of Argentina.<sup>22</sup>

During this booming time for the tango, three types of the tango were standardized within the literature. The first is the *tango milonga*, which was strictly instrumental with strong rhythmic character.<sup>23</sup> It was of a moderate tempo and typically written in A-B-A form, with the A sections being more melodic than the B section.<sup>24</sup> The second type was the *tango romanza*, which could be either instrumental or vocal, but featured highly romantic texts when sung.<sup>25</sup> In this variety of tango, special emphasis is placed on melody and harmony, and features a higher level of harmonic complexity.<sup>26</sup> The third type is the *tango canción*, or literally “tango song” is always vocal with an instrumental accompaniment, and is usually extremely sentimental.<sup>27</sup> The lyrics of these tango songs expressed different views on love and life, and could at times be highly pessimistic or dramatic.<sup>28</sup> I-Ching Tsai, a doctoral student from Claremont Graduate University, summed up the *guardia nueva* and its influence on culture well by saying, “The tango

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<sup>20</sup> Béhague, “Tango,” 4.

<sup>21</sup> Goerzten, “Globalization and the Tango,” 69.

<sup>22</sup> Béhague, “Tango,” 4.

<sup>23</sup> Béhague, “Tango,” 2.

<sup>24</sup> Tsai, “The Evolution of the tango and Astor Piazzolla’s Tango Nuevo,” 18.

<sup>25</sup> Béhague, “Tango,” 2.

<sup>26</sup> Tsai, “The Evolution of the tango and Astor Piazzolla’s Tango Nuevo,” 18.

<sup>27</sup> Béhague, “Tango,” 2.

<sup>28</sup> Béhague, “Tango,” 2.

became a new vehicle for the expression of thoughts and feelings, simultaneously opening doors to the future possibilities for both tango poets and singers.”<sup>29</sup>

The fall of the *guardia nueva* period and what is considered to be the “first tango crisis” occurred in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Several factors contributed to this fall: political corruption disrupted the newly created harmony between the upper and lower classes that tango had created, and left president Hipólito Yrigoyen in office to rule by force and terror; economic downfall caused farmers to migrate into cities looking for work, worsening the unemployment that already existed in those hubs; the brothels of the nation were shut down, removing many popular spaces for tango performance; and finally, the tragic death of beloved Carlos Gardel caused many to turn away from the tango. <sup>30</sup>

### The Golden Age of Tango

Luckily, towards the end of the 1930s, the tango experienced a massive upswing and once again took a prominent place in Argentinian culture, and the 1940s came to be known as the golden age of the tango.<sup>31</sup> Like its previous downfall, the revived success of the tango relied on several outside factors. The development and increasing popularity of mass media communication, including the introduction of the radio and the sound motion picture, provided the tango with a new medium from which to be enjoyed.<sup>32</sup> During this time, the second World

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<sup>29</sup> Tsai, “The Evolution of the tango and Astor Piazzolla’s Tango Nuevo,” 17.

<sup>30</sup> Tsai, “The Evolution of the tango and Astor Piazzolla’s Tango Nuevo,” 22.

<sup>31</sup> Tsai, “The Evolution of the tango and Astor Piazzolla’s Tango Nuevo,” 22.

<sup>32</sup> Tsai, “The Evolution of the tango and Astor Piazzolla’s Tango Nuevo,” 22.

War was occurring primarily in Europe, and Argentina decided to cut off imported goods entirely; this provided more manufacturing jobs for Argentinian citizens right at home.<sup>33</sup>

This period of the tango's development roughly corresponded with the big band era of the United States, and this played a part in the common instrumentation of the time.<sup>34</sup> The *orquesta típica* was effectively the jazz big band of tango, including a string section with violins, a rhythm section with piano and double bass, and a bandoneón section (bandoneóns were German-imported diatonic accordions that were perhaps the most important instrument of the tango sound).<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately, not even the golden era of tango could stop further changes that clashed with the culture of the tango.

By the 1950s, the tango had reached its second "crisis." Tango record sales decreased by half, and nightclubs began to play new music that wasn't tango.<sup>36</sup> Artistic development in the United States was extremely competitive with the tango; Hollywood's commercial musicals became immensely popular and competed for an audience, and American popular music styles such as Surf and Rock-and-Roll took over the radio stations.<sup>37</sup> While this may seem like a relatively natural fade out of music style as every culture experiences, the decline of tango was truly a loss of part of the Argentinian identity, and the tango lovers of the nation were searching for the next resurgence.

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<sup>33</sup> Tsai, "The Evolution of the tango and Astor Piazzolla's Tango Nuevo," 23.

<sup>34</sup> Béhague, "Tango," 2.

<sup>35</sup> Béhague, "Tango," 2.

<sup>36</sup> Tsai, "The Evolution of the tango and Astor Piazzolla's Tango Nuevo," 23.

<sup>37</sup> Tsai, "The Evolution of the tango and Astor Piazzolla's Tango Nuevo," 23.

## Nuevo Tango

In the mid-1950s, following the second downfall of the tango just a few years prior, Astor Piazzolla set out to consciously create a more academic form of tango, called *Nuevo Tango*, with new sounds breaking the classic forms of tango, and mixing in elements of jazz.<sup>38</sup> Piazzolla's self-described goal for this new tango was to create music "that appealed to the ear rather than the feet."<sup>39</sup> While his complex harmonies and structural changes distanced the tango from the traditional culture, they reflected the change of Buenos Aires into a metropolis, and never lost their ability to invoke emotions unique to the tango in its listeners.<sup>40</sup>

Astor Piazzolla was born in Mar del Plata, Buenos Aires in 1921, and moved with his family to Greenwich Village, New York City, when he was just three years old.<sup>41</sup> Piazzolla grew up listening to his father's tango records of Carlos Gardel and other tango greats, and it was his father's wish for his son to become a famous tango musician.<sup>42</sup> In order to cultivate this dream, Piazzolla was given a second-hand bandoneón by his father when he was eight years old, and he began to learn it.<sup>43</sup> The Piazzolla's happened to live next to Béla Wilda, a pianist who had studied under Rachmaninoff, and Astor began taking lessons on his bandoneón with him when he was eleven years old; this instilled in him not only a love for tango music, which the bandoneón was so intertwined with, but a love for classical music as well.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Jessica Marie Quinones, "Constructing the authentic: approaching the '6 Tango-Etudes pour Flute Seule' by Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992) for interpretation and performance," PhD diss., (University of Huddersfield, 2013), 28.

<sup>39</sup> Quinones, "Constructing the authentic," 28.

<sup>40</sup> Tsai, "The Evolution of the tango and Astor Piazzolla's Tango Nuevo," 25.

<sup>41</sup> Cliff Eisen, "Astor Piazzolla," *Oxford Music Online*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1.

<sup>42</sup> Quinones, "Constructing the authentic," 25.

<sup>43</sup> Quinones, "Constructing the authentic," 25.

<sup>44</sup> Quinones, "Constructing the authentic," 25.



At thirteen years old, fates aligned for Astor Piazzolla to meet and interact with the great tango master Carlos Gardel before his passing. The two met by chance, and Piazzolla was offered a part as an extra in Gardel's upcoming movie *El día que me quires* ("The day you love me"). During the process of filming, Gardel learned that Piazzolla played the bandoneón and after a short performance, requested that Piazzolla accompany him on his movie tour. Predictable for the father of a thirteen-year-old boy, Astor's father denied the request, and ended up saving his son's life; Carlos Gardel and his entire crew died in a plane crash on that very tour.<sup>45</sup>

Piazzolla returned to Argentina at age sixteen, during the golden age of tango.<sup>46</sup> There he joined what was considered the greatest tango orchestra of all time, Anibal Troilo's *Orquesta Típica*, and began studying composition with Alberto Ginastera.<sup>47</sup> At Ginaster's urging, Piazzolla entered his work "Buenos Aires in Three Movements" into a classical composition competition for the Fabian Sevitsky Award.<sup>48</sup> Despite the audience breaking out into a brawl about the inclusion of bandoneóns into a classical ensemble, Piazzolla still won the award: a grant from the French government to study in France under Nadia Boulanger, a world-renowned composition teacher of the time.<sup>49</sup>

Piazzolla himself has spoken of the impact that studying under Boulanger had on his music in his own words. As recorded in his memoir, Piazzolla speaks of that time, saying that,

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<sup>45</sup> Eisen, "Astor Piazzolla," 1.

<sup>46</sup> Eisen, "Astor Piazzolla," 1.

<sup>47</sup> Eisen, "Astor Piazzolla," 1.

<sup>48</sup> Tsai, "The Evolution of the tango and Astor Piazzolla's Tango Nuevo," 24.

<sup>49</sup> Tsai, "The Evolution of the tango and Astor Piazzolla's Tango Nuevo," 25.

“I had two great teachers, as I have said: Nadia Boulenger and Alberto Ginastera. They taught me all the secrets of musical technique. I place Nadia a step above in my acknowledgement because she was the one who put me on the path: she was the one who made me discover the real Piazzolla, the one who ended my confusion... I arrived at Nadia’s house with a suitcase full of scores, the complete classical oeuvre I had written to that point. Nadia spent the first two weeks analyzing the work. ‘To teach you,’ she said, ‘I first must know where your music is going.’ One day, finally, she told me that everything I had brought with me was well written but that she could not find the spirit in it. She asked me what music I played in my country, what I wanted to do. I had not told her about my past as a tango musician, much less that my instrument, the bandoneón, was in the closet of my room in Paris. I thought to myself: if I tell her the truth she will throw me out the window. Nadia had been a classmate of Maurice Ravel, a teacher of Igor Markevitch, Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Robert Casadesus, and Jean Françaix. By then she was already considered the best teacher of music in the world. I was a simple *tanguero*. But after two days I had to tell her the truth. I told her I made my living arranging for tango orchestras. I told her about Aníbal Troilo, about my own orchestra, and how, tired of all that, I thought my future was in classical music. Nadia looked into my eyes and asked me to play one of my tangos at the piano. So I confessed to her that I played bandoneón; I told her she shouldn’t expect a good piano player because I wasn’t. She insisted, ‘It doesn’t matter Astor, play your tango.’ And I started with ‘Triunfal.’ When I finished,

Nadia took my hands in hers and with that English of hers, so sweet, she said, ‘Astor, this is beautiful. I like it a lot. Here is the true Piazzolla—do not ever leave him.’ It was the great revelation of my musical life.”<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

Astor Piazzolla, having found himself, went on to write many tangos and influenced the direction of the tango genre with complex harmonies and new rhythms.<sup>51</sup> While tango musicians more accustomed to the culture of traditional tango initially resisted Piazzolla’s music, he eventually won over the traditional *tangueros*, as well as the attention from the rest of the world.<sup>52</sup> He formed several ensembles, including the Octeto Buenos Aires and the Quinteto Nuevo tango which performed in Argentina.<sup>53</sup> He received far more initial success in countries other than Argentina, and wrote about 750 works in all, including numerous film scores and a commission from the Kronos Quartet.<sup>54</sup> Astor Piazzolla’s contribution to the rich and detailed history of the tango is hard to measure, but it is safe to say that the tango would not be what it was today without his influence. In his undertaking to transform the tango from entertainment into an art form, he achieved worldwide success, and brought tango to corners of the globe that would never have had the honor.

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<sup>50</sup> Astor Piazzolla, Natalio Gorin, and Fernando Gonzalez, *Astor Piazzolla: A Memoir*; (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 2001), 70-71.

<sup>51</sup> Tsai, “The Evolution of the tango and Astor Piazzolla’s Tango Nuevo,” 25.

<sup>52</sup> Goerzten, “Globalization and the Tango,” 72.

<sup>53</sup> Eisen, “Astor Piazzolla,” 1.

<sup>54</sup> Eisen, “Astor Piazzolla,” 1.

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