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## **Instrumental Tango Idioms in the Symphonic Works and Orchestral Arrangements of Astor Piazzolla. Performance and Notational Problems: A Conductor's Perspective**

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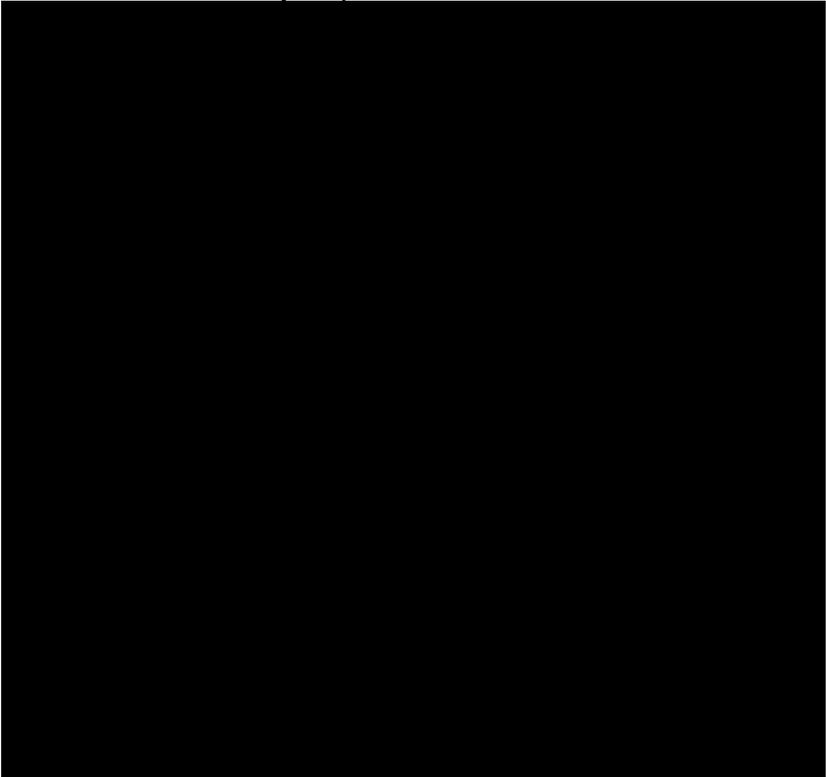
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ORCHESTRAL ARRANGEMENTS OF ASTOR PIAZZOLLA.  
PERFORMANCE AND NOTATIONAL PROBLEMS: A CONDUCTOR'S  
PERSPECTIVE

by

Alejandro Marcelo Drago

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate Studies Office  
of The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

Approved:



May 2008

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The University of Southern Mississippi

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## ABSTRACT

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PERSPECTIVE

by Alejandro Marcelo Drago

May 2008

Tango performance practices and notational conventions included in the orchestral works of Astor Piazzolla belong in two groups. The first is tango performance manner, or the specific way of rendering the written musical text; and the second is tango special effects, which could be defined as a group of non-traditional (for European music) instrumental techniques specific to tango music. Both groups are part of a performance style that has been poorly systematized, if at all, and kept alive only by means of face-to-face transmission. The purpose of this dissertation is to identify and analyze the challenges that Piazzolla faced while including these performance practices into his symphonic compositions, as well as to provide the orchestral conductor with the basic elements for a successful approach to performance.

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*Tambor* (Drum)  
Octaving – *Octavado*, also *Ciriaco Octave*  
Other special tango effects

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## TERMINOLOGY

Unless otherwise specified, the word “Piazzolla” refers to Astor Pantaleón Piazzolla, the composer and bandoneonist.

The word “bandoneón” in singular form will be given in its Spanish spelling, as a reminder of the correct placement of its stress accent.

Some authors consistently use the word ‘tango’ with a capital T: Tango. This is not proper in Spanish. Therefore, I saw no reason to use it in English. Some authors use this different spelling to distinguish between tango as a dance, and Tango as a cultural phenomenon. In this dissertation, in cases where this distinction or clarification seemed relevant, the expressions ‘tango dance,’ and ‘tango culture’ or ‘tango world’ have been used respectively.

Also, in English, there is no distinction between ‘tango’ as a noun and ‘tango’ as an adjective. This can lead to confusion when attempting to distinguish between something that has tango qualities and something that belongs, historically or culturally, to tango. In the very few places where this kind of disambiguation seemed necessary and unavoidable, instead of creating a neologism (“tangoish, tangoistic, tango-like, tango-wise”), the Spanish adjective *tanguero* was used to express the first adjectival meaning (“having ‘tango’ qualities,” or “being representative of ‘tango’ by its character”).

From the word “Argentina” two adjectives are formed: Argentine (with two accepted pronunciations: är’jən-tīn’ and är’jən -tēn’) and Argentinean (this last functioning also as a noun). Although there are no definite rules in English about the usage of either adjective, “Argentine” tends to be used to describe things

related to Argentina as a country, whereas “Argentinean” as an adjective refers to things related to the culture of Argentina or its people. Hence, *Argentine diplomatic representation*, but *Argentinean food*. As a noun, “Argentinean” means “native of Argentina.” The spelling \**Argentinian*, although used sometimes, should be deemed incorrect. In English, it is standard to use the first adjective to refer to Argentine tango. Applied to the word *composer*, both adjectives are used on almost equal footing, although, in scholarly articles, “Argentine composer” is found more often.

Other terms closely related to the tango culture appear in this document.

Their meanings as given here are specific to this cultural context:

*Arrabal*: The outskirts, suburb.

*Barrio*: Neighborhood or district.

*Compadre*: A person living in the suburb, haughty, proud and brave.

*Compadrito*: Typical character of the suburb, a bully and a braggart.

*Conventillo*: Plurifamilial tenement housing with few or no basic comforts, built around central patios where families would socialize and where immigrants of different origins and cultures met and mixed. The *conventillos* housed thousands of poor immigrants from all over Europe (mostly Italy and Spain) and some from the Argentine interior. They were long, open areas, bordered at both sides by rooms and kitchens; usually there was a shared bathroom.

*Gaicho*: A cowboy of the South American pampas. The *gauchos* became folk heroes for their hardiness and, sometimes, lawlessness.

*Guapo*: Nickname for a man who practices the cult of courage.

*Guardia Vieja* (lit.: Old Guard): The tango dance and its music were born and evolved together in the final decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the slums on the outskirts of Buenos Aires and in neighboring Montevideo, Uruguay (just across the Río de la Plata). During its earliest years, from about 1880 to 1900, few tangos were recorded or committed to paper. However, during this final quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was born a new generation of musicians who would soon take the tango beyond its simple beginnings. These are the composers of the Guardia Vieja, the “Old Guard.” From about 1900 to 1920 they developed the tango into one of this century’s most romantic and beautiful musical forms.

*Lunfardo*: Originally, the argot of thieves and outlaws. Later, by extension, the slang of Buenos Aires and the language of many tangos.

*Orquesta típica* (lit. typical orchestra): One of the standard tango ensembles. It typically includes a string section (with violins, viola, and cello), a bandoneón section (with 3 or more bandoneons), piano and double bass.

*Porteño*: Term for the residents of Buenos Aires (the Port).

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine tango performance practices and notational conventions in the orchestral works of Astor Piazzolla. These practices belong in two groups: The first is tango performance manner, or the specific way of rendering the written musical text, and the second is tango effects, which could be defined as a group of non-traditional (for classical European music) instrumental techniques specific to tango music. Both groups are part of a performance style that has been poorly systematized, if at all, and kept alive only by means of oral transmission, i.e., direct communication and imitation among Argentine tango musicians.

These tango practices have found their way into the standard symphonic repertoire through the works of the Argentine composer and bandoneón player Astor Piazzolla (1921 – 1992), considered the principal modern innovator of the Argentine tango. Before 1955, tango music was mostly regarded as merely support for dance, or, since the 1930s, as a genre of popular song. One of Piazzolla's main artistic goals, especially from 1955 until his death, was to elevate tango to a serious concert genre. Piazzolla based most of his compositional work on tango musical elements, and although his compositions incorporated a broad array of musical influences – ranging from jazz to Klezmer and Stravinskian harmonies – the core of his works remained faithful to tango sources.

Piazzolla was confronted by a double challenge. First, he attempted in his compositions to notate an elusive performance style. Second, he did this, in many cases, for musicians who had no experience with this living tradition, and so they had to rely almost completely on the notated text for their performance. It is my intent to examine in this document the problems that arise from this situation.

An important and diverse corpus of scholarship that focuses on traditional tango is available to the researcher. In the area of historical research, an indispensable reference work is certainly "Antología del Tango Rioplatense" by the Instituto Nacional de Musicología Carlos Vega. Among Argentine scholars, the works by Carlos Vega, José Gobello, Horacio Ferrer and Luis Adolfo Sierra occupy a prominent place. Within the historical perspective, a number of books and articles focus on the relationship between tango and social phenomena (for example, Chris Goertzen and María S. Azzi, "Globalization and the Tango," Julie M. Taylor "Tango: Theme of Class and Nation," or "Tango and the Political Economy of Passion: From Exoticism to Decolonization" by Marta Savigliano). Together with this mainstream of scholarly research, there is an ample number of books, essays and journal articles by non-professional researchers, that usually focus on historical minutia or personal accounts of the life of tango musicians and/or dancers. These publications are often the source of very valuable insights and reveal unsuspected connections between facts and actors of the tango scene.

Specifically related to Astor Piazzolla and his work, probably the most complete work to date, in a European language, is “Le Grand Tango” by María S. Azzi and Simon Collier, a book that seems to exhaustively cover all possible references and sources in matters concerning Piazzolla. Other authors, such as Natalio Gorin in his book “Astor Piazzolla - A Memoir,” undertook a journalistic approach. Gorin’s book is based on a series of interviews that took place in 1990. There is even a novel biography of A. Piazzolla by his daughter, Diana, furnished with an important number of pictures, testimonials, a filmography and a discography. However, the unanimous agreement among Piazzolla scholars is that no work has surpassed the meticulousness of Mitsumasa Saito in his book アストル・ピアソラ闘うタンゴ “Asutoru piadora tatakau tango” (*Astor Piazzolla, the Fighter for Tango*).<sup>1</sup> Mr. Saito's 150-page discography and filmography are an invaluable reference in matters of Piazzolla's work.

In the field of theoretical development, important contributions have been made by Malena Kuss, Ramón Pelinski, Omar García Brunelli and Martín Kutnowski. Also, articles by Gabriela Mauriño have addressed interpretative and theoretical issues in Piazzolla's work, although not in as much detail as the above mentioned authors. Their articles provide enlightening insights on the structural aspects of Piazzolla’s compositions and offer conclusions and views that can have a bearing in matters of the interpretation of Piazzolla's music, even though the problem of performance practice and technique is not central to them. Psychoanalyst Carlos Kuri and musicologist Omar Corrado, as well as Gabriela

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<sup>1</sup>I want to express my gratitude to Japanese cellist Chisa Yoshinaga for her help in the painstaking task of reviewing this lengthy work.

Goldenberg, have also contributed with sharp, very well-articulated essays on the psychological and semiotical aspects of Piazzolla's work.

In the background of this landscape of undoubtedly valuable contributions, there are certain voids. First, to the best of my knowledge, none of the above mentioned authors are practicing professional tango music performers.<sup>2</sup> Second, their writings are not meant to be a practical guide for the performing artist, and even when they offer elements that imply a contribution to the interpretative aspect of the performance, they do so without a clear connection to a praxis. Third, these works do not contain detailed and specific analysis and descriptions of tango performance practices and special effects, nor do they try to catalogue or systematize them. The same can be said about notational problems. Finally, none of these works focus on Piazzolla's orchestral production, nor do they address the problems and challenges that stem specifically from the performance of Piazzolla's music (either originally composed for orchestra or transcribed for it) in an orchestral setting.

This document intends to fill this void. It will contribute to a better knowledge of the aforementioned performance practices, advance a systematization of them, and outline a conductor's approach to the performance of Piazzolla's symphonic works, including his orchestral transcriptions of his tango compositions (mainly written for his own ensembles) and works by followers of his aesthetic path.

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<sup>2</sup>With the exception of Dr. Ramón Pelinski, pianist of Tango x 4, Tango x 3 and Métatango.

A problem that I found in developing this document was the need to objectivize knowledge that I gathered from cultural membership, family background, performance experience and personal interaction with leading figures of the tango world, and support my statements with reliable sources on a field that, from the point of view of available scholarship, can be considered uncharted terrain. To sort out this difficulty, I chose to let the musical examples speak for themselves, write in first person at times when knowledge gained from my direct experience was presented, and offer the reader, whenever possible, the context of personal interaction wherein this happened. To a certain point, the assumption that the reader already possesses a comfortable level of familiarity with, and command of, tango topics, was unavoidable. In fact, this dissertation originally had been outlined so as to immediately begin its discussion of the main subject, as described in its title. However, the process of developing this document revealed that the relevance of the matters discussed would be less than apparent to the reader without an historical background on some important key subjects. Thus it begins with a summary history of Argentine tango, followed by a section on its most representative musical instrument, the bandoneón. After that is a brief biography of Astor Piazzolla, including a discussion about Piazzolla's career, his contribution to music in general and tango in particular; and finally, a discussion of the problems of musical notation that his work raises. Only after this will the main problems of tango performance practices, as related to Piazzolla's work, be discussed.

## CHAPTER II

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF TANGO (FROM ITS BEGINNINGS TO 1955)

## Etymology Of The Word

In the journey of exploring the history of tango and its historical predecessor, the *milonga*, the matter of the origins and etymology of these two voices is an inescapable stop. Although there is no complete agreement on this subject, the heated discussions that surround it and the scholarly research that supports and fuels these controversies provide an excellent introduction to the history of tango and shed light on many currently ignored aspects of its early stages.

Discussing the origin of the word *milonga*, José Gobello<sup>3</sup> affirms that it comes from the Western African language Kimbundu, of the Bantu family, and is the plural form of 'mulonga,' which in this language means "word." Thus, *milonga* means "lyrics" or "story." In 1872, when José Hernandez published his poem "Martín Fierro,"<sup>4</sup> the word *milonga* had already acquired the meaning of a gathering where one can dance. A decade later, in 1883, Ventura Lynch<sup>5</sup> wrote:

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<sup>3</sup>**José Gobello**, founder and president of the *Academia Porteña del Lunfardo*, author of a *Dictionary of Lunfardo*, is considered an authority in tango matters.

<sup>4</sup>**Martín Fierro** is a 2,316 line epic poem by the Argentine writer **José Hernández** (1834 – 1886). The poem was originally published in two parts, *El Gaucho Martín Fierro* (1872) and *La Vuelta de Martín Fierro* (1879). The poem, written in a Spanish that evokes rural Argentina, is widely seen as the pinnacle of the genre of "gauchesque" poetry (poems centered around the life of the *gaucho*, written in a style that evokes the rural Argentine ballads known as *payadas*) and a touchstone of Argentine national identity. It has appeared in literally hundreds of editions and has been translated into over seventy languages.

<sup>5</sup>**Ventura Robustiano Lynch** (1850 – 1888), Argentinean musician, painter, folklorist, writer and journalist, a second-generation Irish descendent. Author of a collection of articles originally titled *Costumbres del Indio y del Gaucho* (*The Customs of the Indians and the Gauchos*), later published as a book under the title *La Provincia de Buenos Aires hasta la*

In the periphery of the city the Milonga is so generalized that it is danced in all the gatherings; it can be heard played by guitars, accordions, comb and paper, or played by street musicians with flute, harp and violin.

Today in Argentina, *milonga* has several meanings: a lively type of music, intermediate between the Habanera and the tango; the dance to this music (slightly different in its steps from tango); and the place or gathering where one dances.<sup>6</sup>

There is no agreement as to the etymology of the word *tango*. In 19<sup>th</sup>-century Spain, the word tango was used for a genre of flamenco. There are some place-names in Africa (Angola and Mali) called “tango.” Also, in Spanish colonial documents, the vocable is used in reference to the place where the black slaves celebrated their festive meetings. Even an extremely doubtful Latin etymology has been proposed by the Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy: Latin “ego tango” = English “I play” (an instrument).<sup>7</sup> Later editions of the Dictionary removed this reference. The 1925 edition, defined tango as “Dance of high society imported from America at the beginning of this century,” without reference to the Latin etymology, and included two more meanings: “music for this dance”

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*definición de la Cuestión Capital de la República (The Province of Buenos Aires before the establishment of the National Capital City).*

<sup>6</sup>Sergio Suppa, “A History of Argentine Tango,” ToTango.net  
<<http://totango.net/sergio.html>> (accessed October 28, 2007)

<sup>7</sup>The 1914 edition of the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* (Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy, the institution responsible for regulating the Spanish language) offered this etymology, and since then it has been time and again uncritically repeated.

and also “a type of Honduran drum.” It is only in the 1984 edition that tango is defined as an Argentine dance.<sup>8</sup>

In any case, the word *tango* appeared much earlier than the dance. It first appeared outside Argentina, in the Canary Islands and in different places of the Americas, with the meaning of “gathering of blacks to dance to drum music, also the name the Africans gave the drum itself.” In the *Diccionario Provincial de Voces Cubanas* (1836) by Esteban Pichardo,<sup>9</sup> “tango” is defined as “get-together of newly-arrived blacks to dance to drums or kettledrums.” In Buenos Aires, as early as the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, the word *tango* referred to the houses where the blacks carried out their dances.

The African origin of the word *tango* is nowadays accepted by the largest number of scholars.<sup>10</sup> The Argentine historian Ricardo Rodríguez Molas reviewed the languages spoken by the slaves brought to Argentina.<sup>11</sup> These belonged to tribes from Congo, the Gulf of Guinea and Southern Sudan. In their languages, as Rodríguez Molas established, *tango* means “closed space,” “circle,” or “any private space to which one must ask permission to enter.” The slave traders called *tango* the places where black slaves were kept, both in Africa as well as

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<sup>8</sup>Real Academia Española (RAE) < <http://www.rae.es>>. This website allows the examen of all previous editions of the RAE Dictionary with a special online tool: <<http://buscon.rae.es/ntlle/SrvltGUILoginNtllle>> (accessed November 21, 2007)

<sup>9</sup>Cited by Gabriela Mauriño, “Tango and Milonga: A close relationship,” *CLAVE Magazine, Journal of Latin American Arts and Culture* (September 2002) <<http://www.lafi.org/magazine/articles/tango.html>> (accessed April 23, 2007)

<sup>10</sup>Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., editors, *Africana: the encyclopedia of the African and African American experience*, Basic Civitas Books, New York, 1999. Entry: “Tango.”

<sup>11</sup>Ricardo Rodríguez Molas, *La música y danza de los negros en el Buenos Aires de los siglos XVIII y XIX*, (Buenos Aires: Clio, 1957), 1–3.

in the Americas. The place where slaves were sold also received that name. In summary, the most probable origin of the word *tango* is an African word that designated “a closed space where black people gather to dance,” and later came to mean the dance itself.

### Historical Antecedents Of Tango

During the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, social dancing in Europe and the colonies was practiced standing opposite to each other. Dances of this kind were generically called *contradanzas*. The word ‘*contradanza*’ might have originated from English ‘Country Dance’ transformed into the French ‘*contredanse*’ and later into the Italian ‘*contradanza*.’ The progression of the dancers was somewhat linear around the dance floor. Contact among the partners was limited to touching the hands at certain moments. Among the ‘*contradanzas*,’ the minuet was a particularly popular social dance in Argentina in colonial times. The *habanera*, one of tango’s ancestors, is also a *contradanza*. As for the close hold that characterizes tango, the Viennese waltz was the world’s first popular dance to use it, followed by the polka. European society had an ambivalent feeling about this dance that some perceived as immoral. This, of course, did not prevent European immigrants – low-class workers for the most part – from bringing the dance with them as they moved to Argentina. It was not until 1850, when the Viennese waltz received the sanction of the Parisian high society, that this close-hold dancing was deemed socially acceptable by the rest of the world.

## Demography and Tango

Turn-of-the-century Buenos Aires was an expanding city with an enormous demographic growth rate, sustained above all by emigration originating in several countries. Spaniards and Italians were majority, but Germans, Hungarians, Slavs, Arabs (particularly from Syria and Lebanon) and Jews from Russia and Poland were also part of this migratory current. They composed a huge mass of uprooted and poor working-class individuals, with limited possibilities of communication due to the language barrier. Also, they were mostly male, since they were usually either single men seeking their fortunes or heads-of-family arriving first to make enough money to bring the rest of the family left behind. The population of Buenos Aires was completely unbalanced; 70% of the inhabitants were male.

Argentina grew from a population of two million in 1870 to four million in 1895. Half of that population was concentrated in Buenos Aires. In 1869, Buenos Aires had a population of 180,000. By 1914, its population was 1.5 million. The percentage of foreigners reached over 50%,<sup>12</sup> and the city was also the migratory destiny of inland people. The intermixing of these populations resulted in a melting pot of cultures, in which each culture borrowed dance and music from one another. Traditional polkas, waltzes, and mazurkas were mixed with the popular Habanera from Cuba and the candombe rhythms from Africa. Like the One Step, Charleston and Jitterbug in the United States, the Argentine tango

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<sup>12</sup>Samuel L. Baily, "Marriage Patterns and Immigrant Assimilation in Buenos Aires, 1882-1923," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 60, no. 1 (February 1980): 32-48.

began as part of a culture of the lower classes and only later became acceptable in higher layers of society.

The demographic situation described above fostered the rise and development of a thriving prostitution industry.<sup>13</sup> The network of Buenos Aires brothels provided not only sexual services but also entertainment to the lone males. The women serving in these locations were expected to dance with the clients to the music played by small orchestras. In this environment, in the slums and brothels, a new dance began to a new rhythm. Tango commenced as a very explicit dance in a manner that was hardly socially acceptable. This would become apparent as it spread into an emerging phenomenon and began to expand outside the slums of its city of origin. The titles of the first published tangos were obscene and left little room for doubt.<sup>14</sup>

The paradoxical consequences of this demographic and economic situation for the history of dance and music are various. The relaxed moral atmosphere of the brothels allowed a physical proximity in the dance and an exploration of this proximity that yielded an extraordinary variety of dance steps that otherwise would not have been developed. These steps were the basic repertoire from which, narrowing the choice of steps and postures, a socially

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<sup>13</sup>For a detailed account, see Ernesto Goldar, *La mala vida*, Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1971.

<sup>14</sup>For reasons of good taste, but chiefly because this aspect of the tango history is not central to the theme of this dissertation, I chose not to quote or translate these titles. However, the interested reader should visit the scholarly sound and serious, yet literarily entertaining online article: Garcia Blaya, Ricardo and Bruno Cespi, "*Brothel tango tunes*," Todotango.com <[http://www.todotango.com/english/biblioteca/cronicas/tangos\\_prostibularios.asp](http://www.todotango.com/english/biblioteca/cronicas/tangos_prostibularios.asp)> (accessed November 30, 2007)

acceptable form of the dance would be developed, partially in Argentina and partially in France.

Also, it is important to note that most immigrants were single men hoping to earn their fortunes in this newly expanding country. They were typically poor and desperate, hoping to make enough money to return to Europe or bring their families to Argentina. These feelings have shaped forever the evolution of tango, from the rather frivolous and picturesque character in the beginning to a music that reflects the profound sense of loss and longing for the people and places the immigrants left behind.

Furthermore, although in a later stage and after some severe transformations, tango became a respectable dance, and as such, a part of the socially acceptable courtship rites, the demographic imbalance between male and female populations still persisted. This meant that, in order to be successful in courting, males had to excel in every aspect of the rituals, which included behavior, speech, dress and, of course, dance. During this time the image of the porteños as being extremely elegant started to spread in the world. Striving for excellence, in the case of the dance, meant that males had to be already proficient dancers the very minute they approached any female in the ballroom. This led to the development of a set of idiosyncratic codes of interaction and rituals in the milongas (dance gatherings) of Buenos Aires that are still in effect today. This also meant that the young males had to practice among themselves to hone their skills long before they ever tried to engage in a dance with females. Groups of young men would get together to practice, improvise and innovate,

creating new moves and new steps. This approach facilitated the rapid development of tango. This form of practice has been associated by some scholars with expressions of homosexuality, although it is clear, or rather obvious to anybody who has ever been in touch with authentic sources, i.e. with the old generation of *tangueros*, that this all-male street tango exercise was dictated by reasons of necessity and practicality and was regarded primarily as a male ritual and a way of sharing experience and innovation.<sup>15</sup>

### The Route to Social Acceptance

The style of the tangos composed prior to the 1920s is defined by tango historians as the *Guardia Vieja* (“Old Guard” – see Terminology section): the instrumentation was simpler and the tempo slightly faster. Tango moved out of the outskirts when wealthy youth started “slumming” and taking part occasionally in the *compadritos*’ gatherings. They, in turn, started teaching this new dance to their sisters, neighborhood girls, and other female members of the large Argentinean family, such as cousins and aunts. Each wave of immigrants also contributed to the re-making of tango dance, music, and lyrics. Italian immigrants, some of which would later become key figures in the political scene, took charge of the dance and refined it. They embraced the dance by softening its rough edges and making it suitable to dance in their homes and social gatherings at the

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<sup>15</sup>This statement is based on the personal recollection of countless “old tangueros,” among them Mr. “Pepito” Avellaneda, a deceased dancer of now almost mythical fame, who was a frequent visitor to my house during my childhood. For some years he was also a dance partner of my mother.

*conventillos*.<sup>16</sup> German immigrants introduced the use of the most representative instrument of tango, the bandoneón: a German-made squeezebox, extremely difficult to play, about which we will learn more later. Jewish immigrants introduced the use of the violin. The dance started its progress toward the center of the city by becoming a grandiose form of entertainment in all brothels. It also became synonymous with moral corruption for the upper Argentine class.

In the 1910s, we see the first tango recordings and orchestras: from the traditional number of three musicians (one bandoneón, one violin, and one guitar) to six (two bandoneons, two violins, one piano, and one flute – the so-called *orquesta típica*). In 1913–14, the tango invaded Paris and London through the high, educated society: wealthy Argentineans lived in Europe and gave parties to which the local *beau monde* was invited. Soon tango became a craze all over Europe giving life to the phenomenon called the “Tangomania of the 1920s.”<sup>17</sup> Tango was liberating for women by allowing unprecedented freedom of movement, and seductive for men; it glamorized the image of the Latin lover, of which Rudolf Valentino would become the symbol. Because of this newly acquired fame, upper-class society embraced the dance back in Argentina,

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<sup>16</sup>“Tango took many years to spread to the *conventillos* – their inhabitants were decent people that did not want their families to be exposed to that immoral music and dance. Saturday nights and Sundays were used to celebrate weddings, birthdays, baptisms and other holidays. It was at these occasions that little by little somebody would ask the musicians to play a tango and later on somebody would dance one, purified of the sinful moves – a simplified variety that was initially tolerated with disgust, but later on, anxiously expected.” (Sergio Suppa, op. cit.)

<sup>17</sup>“When the tango made its appearance in the old world in 1910, it released a dance frenzy, almost a mania, which attacked all ages and classes with the same virulence. You may shake your head, smile, mock, or turn away, but this dance madness proves nonetheless that the man of the machine age with his necessary wrist watch and his brain in a constant ferment of work, worry, and calculation has just as much need of the dance as the primitive. For him too the dance is life on another plane.” (Curt Sachs, *World History of the Dance*, (New York: The Norton Library, 1937 (1965)), 446.)

provided that it was “cleaned up” of its most transgressive steps.

Between 1916 and 1920 with the increase of the controls and restrictions on the brothels,<sup>18</sup> tango migrated to cafés, cabarets, and dance halls. By 1918, a few composers were writing original tango lyrics, often as poetry rather than music. Picked up by a rising generation of new singers, the consciously melancholic tone of much of this new writing became a key component in what would become the ‘New Guard’ style, typified by Francisco Canaro, Julio De Caro and, most especially, Carlos Gardel.<sup>19</sup>

While the war in Europe interrupted tango appreciation during the first half of the 1940s, in Argentina a “post-new-guard” style was starting to gain ground, pioneered by Aníbal Troilo, an extraordinary bandoneón player who increased the size of the classic tango orchestra and laid the foundations for the Nuevo Tango style of Piazzolla.<sup>20</sup> This new style occurred roughly parallel with the emergence and duration of the Perón presidency, politicizing the tango.<sup>21</sup> By 1955, when Peronism was collapsing, and American cultural exports were invading Latin America, tango was considered politically incorrect and definitely “out-of-step” with the times.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Sexual commerce was outlawed in Argentina on December 17, 1936 by bill of law no. 12.331.

<sup>19</sup>José Gobello, *Breve Historia Crítica del Tango*, (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1999), 82 – 89.

<sup>20</sup>A more detailed account of Aníbal Troilo’s biography and his relationship with Astor Piazzolla will be offered in a separate section of this document.

<sup>21</sup>**Juan Domingo Perón** (October 8, 1895 – July 1, 1974.) General and politician, elected three times as President of Argentina and serving from 1946 to 1955 and from 1973 to 1974.

<sup>22</sup>According to the personal testimony and public statements of numerous tango musicians, among them, Maestro Atilio Stampone.

This is the social, political, historical and social landscape that was awaiting the young Piazzolla when he disembarked in 1955 in Buenos Aires,

“with a stick of dynamite in either hand,” ready to “provoke a national scandal, to break with all the musical schemes prevailing in Argentina,” throwing his new octet, “eight war-tanks,” into battle.<sup>23</sup>

Piazzolla would start a process that would forever transform tango. Thus, the year 1955 can be regarded as the beginning of the New Tango.

### The Bandoneón

#### *Brief history*<sup>24</sup>

The bandoneón is a free-reed instrument that looks like a large square concertina.<sup>25</sup> This bellows instrument was invented by Carl Friedrich Uhlig in Chemnitz probably around 1834. Heinrich Band (1821 – 1860), a music teacher and instrument dealer, promoted this instrument though, he did not invent it. He modified and extended its original keyboard layout and called this instrument *Bandonion*, shorthand for *Heinrich Band's Akkordion*. It was intended as an instrument for religious music, a substitute for the organ in small church communities, in contrast to its closest cousin, the German concertina, which was

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<sup>23</sup>Astor Piazzolla, quoted by María Susana Azzi and Simon Collier, *Le grand tango: the life and music of Astor Piazzolla*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 57.

<sup>24</sup>The information provided in this section has been extracted and resumed from Christian Mensing's Bandoneon Page <<http://www.inorg.chem.ethz.ch/tango/band/bandoneon.html>> (accessed August 31, 2007) and Javier Garcia Méndes and Arturo Penón, *The Bandonion: A Tango History* (London, Ontario: Nightwood Editions, 1988), and expanded on the basis of my personal experience and communications with bandoneonists.

<sup>25</sup>Concertina: (Fr. *concertina*; Ger. *Konzertina*; It. *piccola fisarmonica*) [squeezebox]. A bellows-blown, hexagonal- or octagonal-shaped, free reed instrument, with buttons parallel to the bellows on both sides. Allan W. Atlas: 'Concertina', *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy <<http://www.grovemusic.com>> (accessed February 24, 2008)

regarded as a folk instrument. Because of the very complex layout of the buttons, a greater diffusion of the Bandonion was prevented.

Its popularity changed rapidly when around 1890 German immigrants brought the original instrument, manufactured by Ernst Louis Arnold (ELA) to Argentina, where it became well suited to the emerging tango. It was the tango, in fact, that saved this instrument from extinction, which is why the instrument's name changed from its original Bandonion, to the Spanish *Bandoneón*.<sup>26</sup> In 1911 the most famous producer, Alfred Arnold in Carlsfeld (whose bandoneons are called "Double A," after his factory seal – AA), began manufacturing bandoneons exclusively for the market in Argentina and Uruguay. In only one year (1930) 25,000 units were exported to Argentina. Considering that the price of a bandoneón was approximately the same as that of a piano, one can appreciate its commercial success. Unfortunately, production ceased during World War II. A few samples left the factory after the war, but the factory stopped its production in 1956 for quality reasons and a shrinking demand.

### *Technical Aspects*

Whereas the accordion is usually constructed using conical shaped reeds mounted on individual plates, easily replaceable with commercially pretuned reeds, the bandoneón has up to seven bi-sonoric tones, or fourteen rectangularly shaped reeds on one zinc or aluminum plate. Each tone has a fundamental and

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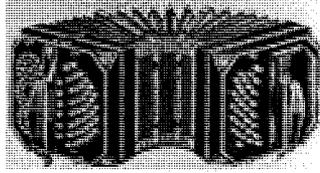
<sup>26</sup>After World War II the East German Language Council accepted the term Bandoneon (without the written accent) as a regular denomination besides the original one. Source: The German Language Council website – Deutscher Sprachrat <<http://www.deutscher-sprachrat.de>> (accessed February 24, 2008)

an octave mounted on a separate reed plate, which must be tuned without vibrato. That means that the two voices must be tuned precisely an octave apart, resulting in a characteristically dry sound. The tonal range of the bandoneón is the same as for the cembalo, and Baroque music sounds especially pleasant on it.

Like accordions and concertinas, the bandoneón is played by holding the instrument between both hands and either pushing in (“cerrando” – closing) or pulling out (“abriendo” – opening) the instrument, while simultaneously pressing one or more buttons with the fingers. In contrast to the accordion, the bandoneón has no predefined cords. Unlike the piano accordion, it does not have keyboards per se, but has buttons on both sides. In addition, most of the buttons give a different tone whether the bellow is opened or closed. This type of instrument is improperly called “diatonic bandoneón,” as opposed to the so-called chromatic instruments, with equal tone for opening and closing, created around 1925 by Charles Peguri in Paris. This means that each keyboard actually has two layouts – one for the opening notes, and one for the closing notes. Since the right- and left-hand keyboards are also different, this adds up to four different keyboard layouts that must be learned in order to play the instrument. There is also a difference between the notes produced on the button layout of an Argentine-tuned bandoneón versus one that is German-tuned.

Additionally, none of these keyboard layouts presents a scalar sequence of notes. A few of the adjacent buttons form triads; for example, the buttons under three adjacent fingers might sound G, B, and D when the instrument is

closed, and F#, A, and C when it is opened – an example from an Argentine-tuned bandoneón.



**Fig. 1 – the bandoneón**

After all these references, it should come as no surprise that the bandoneón is regarded among tango musicians as an extremely difficult instrument to play and whose construction is devilish and totally devoid of any bit of logic. Nevertheless, it is impossible to conceive of the modern tango without it.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>The bandoneón has been called for on occasion by early 20<sup>th</sup>-century composers such as Kurt Weill and Heinrich Werle, and more recently by contemporary composers such as Toru Takemitsu, Mauricio Kagel and others.

CHAPTER III  
PIAZZOLLA: THE MAN AND THE ARTIST

Biography

Astor Pantaleón Piazzolla was born March 11, 1921 in Mar del Plata, Argentina. He spent his childhood between Buenos Aires and New York. At the age of nine he started to study music in the United States and continued learning in Buenos Aires after his return in 1937.<sup>28</sup> His career started when he took part as a bandoneón player in Aníbal Troilo's orchestra. In 1953, the French government awarded him a scholarship to study with the legendary Nadia Boulanger, who encouraged him to follow his own style. In 1955, Piazzolla came back home and formed the Octeto Buenos Aires (OBA). The selection of musicians he chose – in an experience similar to Gerry Mulligan's jazz band – ended up outlining daring arrangements and unusual tango timbres, such as the introduction of the electric guitar. Piazzolla's presence at first generated misgivings, envy and admiration among tango artists. In the 1960s his music was subjugated by strong criticisms, and Piazzolla had to defend it with great personal effort. The controversy was whether or not his music was tango, and it reached such a heat that Piazzolla had to redefine it as "contemporary Buenos Aires music." During that time his ensemble was, basically, the Astor Piazzolla Quintet (A.P.Q.) His audience was made up of university students, youth and intellectuals, but the A.P.Q. was far from being a mass ensemble. He was at the

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<sup>28</sup>The main facts of Piazzolla's biography, as offered in this section, were extracted from the official webpage of the Piazzolla Foundation [www.piazzolla.org](http://www.piazzolla.org) <<http://www.piazzolla.org/>> (accessed August 31, 2007) and expanded for clarification with information from other documentary and oral sources.

height of his creative period and surrounded himself with the best musicians. With compositions such as *Adiós Nonino*, *Decarísimo* and *La Muerte del Angel* he started a path that would reach peaks such as his concert in the Philharmonic Hall of New York and his collaboration with writer Jorge Luis Borges. In his last years, Piazzolla preferred to give concerts as a soloist in the company of a symphonic orchestra, with a few performances with the A.P.Q. This is how he traveled the world and kept extending the magnitude of his audience in each and every continent for the good and the glory of the music of Buenos Aires.

Astor Piazzolla died in Buenos Aires on July 4, 1992, but he left as a legacy his invaluable work – which encompasses some fifty recordings – and the huge influence of his style. Piazzolla's compositions gave tango a new face. His opus, comprising more than 1000 works, a unique career and an undoubtedly Argentinean flavor, continues to influence the best musicians in the world, such as violinist Gidon Kremer, cellist Yo-Yo-Ma, Kronos Quartet, pianists Emanuel Ax and Arthur Moreira Lima, guitarists Al Di Meola, Sergio Assad and Odair Assad, and numerous chamber music and symphonic orchestras.

### Piazzolla as Innovator and his Place in the History of Tango

This section will discuss Piazzolla's contributions to musical style in general, and tango in particular, using the writings of Carlos Kuri<sup>29</sup> and Omar

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<sup>29</sup>Carlos Martín Kuri, "Agony of the Genre and Power of the Name: the Constitution of Piazzolla's Aesthetics," *Tango, Bandoneón, Piazzolla*, 2000. The Graduate Center of The City University of New York, 2000. Reproduced with permission of the author on the website of the Piazzolla Foundation, Piazzolla.org <<http://www.piazzolla.org/nyplaque/ny-kuri-spanish.html>> (accessed August 18, 2007)

Corrado<sup>30</sup> as points of departure. In order to properly place Piazzolla's innovations within a frame of reference, we must first take into consideration the development of tango as a genre through its apex in the mid-1940s in the work of the celebrated trilogy Aníbal Troilo, Homero Manzi and Edmundo Rivero.<sup>31</sup> I shall also consider the main trends in academic composition in Argentina during the 1930s, 40s and 50s.

During the 1940s, considered the "Golden Decade" of tango, big tango orchestras flourished under the direction of Aníbal Troilo, Osvaldo Pugliese, and Juan D'Arienzo. The piano was already established as a tango instrument, and bandoneón developed into a leading soloistic and virtuosic instrument. Milonga and tango became definitively separated, and the tango-song reached its splendor. A new market in the form of Carnival balls and coffee-house performances opened for the tango musicians and singers, and during this decade, some of the classics of the genre were created: "Uno," "Sur," "Malena" and "Los Mareados."

At this point it is important to underscore that, using the words of C. Kuri, "tango was not only an art, but also a socio-cultural code of what is considered *porteño*."<sup>32</sup> In other words, tango was, and still is, a strong element in the construction of an identity of Buenos Aires – hence the importance of defining tango as a genre. In the 1940s, that definition certainly did not include the

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<sup>30</sup>Omar Corrado, "Significar una ciudad – Astor Piazzolla y Buenos Aires," *Revista del Instituto Superior de Música, Universidad Nacional del Litoral* 9 (August 2002): 52 – 61.

<sup>31</sup>In music, poetry and singing respectively.

<sup>32</sup>Kuri, Carlos. Op. cit.

incorporation of elements of contemporary classical music or non-Argentine folk music genres such as jazz. Rather, tango would have been defined in oppositional terms to these alien genres. It is precisely because of the importance of tango as a socio-cultural code that tango “adds an ethic requirement to the criteria used to identify the essential attributes of its music.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, drawing the line between what is tango and what is not, what is and what is not an acceptable part of tango, would be attached with an ethical meaning, and would become one of the most heated debates in the history of Argentine culture in general – one that continues today.

Piazzolla operated in two musical worlds, classical and tango.<sup>34</sup> For a long time this was the source of an extreme inner tension and powerful personal and artistic contradictions. After the year spent in Paris working under the guidance of Nadia Boulanger and after her revolutionary recommendation to Piazzolla to return to his tangos, Piazzolla found a completely new approach to this dichotomy, one that justified the label “New Tango” applied to his work from that moment on. In the words of C. Kuri,

What used to be classical *or* tango, now has to be classical *and* tango, but in the most effective way: The key is to work with classical music procedures on the roots of tango. Without being alienated in the European musical tradition and standing on tango, he succeeded in taking advantage of the full constellation of techniques.[...] (the) tension between his European formation, jazz and tango is not eliminated but instead changed into an aesthetic identity. Thus, a music which is as passionate as it is elaborated,

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>I feel that an appropriate description of Piazzolla's situation would be to say that he was *bi-musical* – a term employed by N. Jairazbhoy discussing the subjective elements in musical notation (Nazir A. Jairazbhoy, “The “Objective” and Subjective View in Music Transcription,” *Ethnomusicology* 21, no. 2 (May 1977): 269).

and created from a new mixture and with no eclecticism, is born. That is the foundation of Piazzolla's aesthetics.<sup>35</sup>

The prominent features of this new compositional style and aesthetics could be listed as follows:

#### A. Conceptual Changes

##### 1) *Elimination of the singer's privileged place.*

The creation of the tango-song is generally associated with the figure of Carlos Gardel and his recording of *Mi Noche Triste* in 1917. Tango-song consolidated as a genre during the 1920s and since then, the tango singer had been an unquestioned starring figure of any tango ensemble. Piazzolla would turn his back to the primacy of the singer and move toward a chamber-like form of music. Only his collaboration since 1968 with the poet Horacio Ferrer would change this situation and lead to the creation of a collection of tango-ballades that includes masterpieces such as *Balada para un Loco*, *Los Pájaros Perdidos* and *Chiquilín de Bachín*.

##### 2) *Abandonment of tango-dance.*

The main market for tango orchestras during the 1940s was the ballroom performance. This type of performance dictated a musical structure and style tailored to suit the demands of the dancer. Since Piazzolla intended his music to be a concert genre, he had to free himself from this dictate. One of the main criticisms he received early in his career as an arranger, from Aníbal Troilo, was that his arrangements were ill-suited for dancing. Piazzolla ended up dispensing

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

with all of the dance conventions in tango. It was not until much later, when tango-dance, due to an increasing internationalization and professionalization, started incorporating elements of jazz and modern dance, that Piazzolla's compositions made their way back to the dance floor.

3) *Elimination of the "tango show" aspects.*

As is the case with a number of musical genres that are considered representative of a country or ethnicity, particularly when they turn into a cultural export, a number of clichés end up being attached to them. In the course of time these clichés turn into a scenic requirement for the marketing of musical productions. Thus, certain types of supposedly *porteño* attires, scenery, dramatic plots, lightning and, of course, the participation of one or more dancing couples have become a convention, a "must" of every tango performance, which, under the dictate of these conventions, had necessarily to be a "tango show." The idea of a "tango concert" was alien both to Argentine local audiences (which associated tango with dancing events, singing, or salon music) and to the international public (which knew tango in the context of tango shows, either touring in Europe, the United States or Japan, or as a tourist attraction in Buenos Aires). Piazzolla's plan of turning tango into a concert genre, and tango performance into an auditory experience, led him to a break with all the standardized imagery of the tango-show.

## *B. Changes in Instrumentation*

### *1) Use of noise.*

Piazzolla's intimate knowledge of Stravinsky's and Bartók's work, as well as his close ties with jazz and Klezmer genres, gave him a perspective on rhythm that demanded a radical transformation of the way it was to be treated in his music. Percussive effects, sporadically used in tango before Piazzolla, gained a completely new significance under him. I shall analyze this topic in detail in the chapter devoted to tango special effects.

### *2) Incorporation of non-traditional instruments into the tango ensemble.*

In different stages of his career, Piazzolla incorporated instruments that were not part of the traditional tango ensembles: violoncello, electric guitar and percussion, not to mention his short-lived experience with the Electronic Octet, which consisted of electric bass, electric piano, organ, synthesizer, drum set, saxophone and flute. Also, his last ensemble – the New Tango Sextet, (1989–1990) – was famous, not for the incorporation of some unusual instruments, but for the *exclusion* of one of the most *tanguero* instruments, the violin. Piazzolla's preference for the symphonic orchestra could be included in this list, since he wrote symphonic arrangements of some of his chamber works, most notably *Adios Nonino*. Piazzolla's choices in matters of instrumentation implied the abandonment of the model of the *orquesta típica*.

### C. Compositional Techniques

#### 1) Improvisational elements.

Piazzolla incorporated an improvisational dimension to his works that delves in the traditions of jazz, but also – as will be discussed in a separate chapter – is rooted in the Baroque traditions of classical music.

#### 2) Polyphony and harmony.

Piazzolla introduced imitative counterpoint in tango, and brought harmonic audacities to a level never before seen in this genre. These innovations, however, when analyzed in the wider framework of the trends in classical music during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, show Piazzolla standing firmly within the limits of the neo-classic modernity. As García Brunelli observed,

[...] Piazzolla never approached by his own initiative or through his teachers a musical language that was not tonal. Dodecaphonism never was a part of his musical language or his musical concerns, in spite of some comments that may have us think otherwise. The academic composers to which he felt attracted were Bartók, Villa-Lobos, Stravinsky and Gershwin; in other words, representatives of the nationalistic schools of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, because these schools provided him with the means to link his academic education with his popular musical experience.<sup>36</sup>

### Piazzolla as Composer and Performer

Piazzolla was the first great tango musician to open the doors of tango to an array of various influences, but it would be as correct to say that he was the most *tanguero* of the great international musicians. Piazzolla's work is rooted in tango, belongs to tango, and he wanted it to be that way. Presenting myriad

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<sup>36</sup>Omar García Brunelli, "La música de Astor Piazzolla y su relación con el tango como especie de música popular urbana," *Revista de Instituto Nacional de Musicología Carlos Vega*, XII (1992): 155–221.

quotations from his interviews over more than forty years of professional activity to prove this point is unnecessary, because the controversy to which he was implicitly responding with his public statements (a controversy about the place of his work in tango, and the place of tango in his work) no longer exists, and also because Piazzolla made that point sufficiently clear.

Piazzolla became famous not just as a composer, but as the performer of his own compositions. The Piazzolla that emerged after his life-changing meeting with Nadia Boulanger would not have come into existence without his experience as a bandoneonist. The bandoneón was for Piazzolla both the tool he used to shape the characteristic features of the performances of his works, and his way to connect to the tango heritage and legitimately claim it as his own. The idiosyncratic and semi-improvised character of his performances, the continuous revisions to which he subjected his own compositions, the spontaneity of many of his compositional improvements, all render his performances just as reliable and inescapable a reference for the scholar and performer as the printed scores of his compositions with their many arrangements.

As Ramón Pelinski<sup>37</sup> has so shrewdly observed,

The first observation concerns the identity of the material trace to be analyzed: we perform commercial editions of the pieces under discussion that offer just a simplified version, a piano reduction, which may serve as a reminder for the arranger (or for improvisation purposes), or as a document to ensure the author's copyright. Given the fact that performances (live or recorded) are generally based on a written arrangement, designed for the ensemble that plays the piece, we might think that this arrangement could serve as the material trace for the technical analysis.

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<sup>37</sup>Ramón Pelinski, "Astor Piazzolla: entre tango et fugue, à la recherche d'une identité stylistique," *Analyse musicale* 48 (Sept. 2003): 38–54.

However, if we consider that the manner of performance makes part of the composition, and that it affects the very substance of the music as a mediator of the emotions and significations, we cannot oversee the performance – either live or recorded – as an object of analysis.

The consideration of the sound document and the arrangement, of the interpretation and the composition with its consequences for the analysis, is justified by the ambivalent character of tango, a music composed (written) but whose essence demands the sonic concretization of idiomatic traits of interpretation. After all, music, before becoming a written document, is the sonic experience of a listener and the projection of this experience into his life; this is more pertinent in the present case that Piazzolla was at the same time composer and interpreter, and he left traces as well on the scores-arrangements as in his performances. In other words, we try to move away, as much as possible, from the traditional graphocentrism of musical analysis to privilege a soundcentrism.<sup>38</sup>

In synthesis, we can just follow Gabriela Mauriño's recommendation:

In order to interpret Piazzolla's music, it is important to listen to his work and the rest of tango music as much as possible. It is recommended to listen to Piazzolla's main predecessors in instrumental tango history [...] etc." – "It is important to listen to Piazzolla's pieces in their original interpretations."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>“La première observation concerne l'identité de la trace matérielle analysée: nous exécutons les éditions commerciales des pièces en question que n'offrent qu'une version simplifiée, réduite pour piano, qui servent aussi bien d'aide-mémoire pour l'arrangement (ou l'improvisation), que de document destiné à assurer les droits d'auteur. Etant donné que l'interprétation (live ou enregistrée) se fonde en général sur un arrangement écrit, destiné à l'ensemble que joue la pièce, on peut penser qu'il pourrait servir de trace matérielle pour l'analyse technique. Pourtant, si l'on considère que les modalités de l'interprétation font partie de la composition, qu'elles affectent la substance de la musique comme médiateur des émotions et des significations, on ne peut faire abstraction de l'exécution - live, sinon enregistrée - comme objet d'analyse.

La prise en compte de document sonore et de l'arrangement, de l'interprétation et de la composition avec ses conséquences sur l'analyse, se justifie par le caractère ambivalent du tango, musique composée (écrite) mais dont l'essence a besoin de la concrétisation sonore de traits idiomatiques d'interprétation. Après tout, la musique, avant d'être un document écrit, est d'abord l'expérience sonore d'un auditeur et la projection de celle-ci dans sa vie; elle est d'autant plus pertinente dans le cas présent que Piazzolla est à la fois compositeur et interprète et qu'il laisse des traces aussi bien dans la partition-arrangement que dans son exécution. En d'autres termes, nous essayons de nous éloigner, dans la mesure du possible, du graphocentrisme traditionnel de l'analyse musical pour privilégier un sonocentrisme.”

<sup>39</sup>Gabriela Mauriño, “Interpreting the Tango Music of Astor Piazzolla,” *Saxophone-symposium* 23 (1998): 45–61.

Furthermore, I suggest that not only the specific Piazzollean manner of performance is an intrinsic part of his compositions and therefore must be kept always in mind during analysis, but his manner of performance is indeed one of the most authentic tango elements of his work, the one that links his compositional work the most with the tango heritage, and the one that, paradoxically, cannot be captured in musical notation.

How his manner of performance relates to tango will be analyzed in the chapter devoted to the problem of musical notation. At this stage, a point whose importance there is no way to sufficiently stress should be kept in mind: Piazzolla's compositions can only be properly understood and performed with a background of familiarity with their tango roots and with the sonoric document of Piazzolla's own performances.

#### Piazzolla and the Bandoneón School

During the years preceding his move to Paris, Piazzolla had given up his own instrument completely: he devoted himself fully to composing, arranging and musical direction, and had stopped playing the bandoneón as an expression of his will to leave the world of the nightclubs and commit himself exclusively to serious academic music. But after his encounter with Nadia Boulanger, and the rediscovery of his tango roots during the year he was working under her guidance, Piazzolla went back to his instrument, as the leader of the Octeto Buenos Aires (OBA), the new ensemble with which Piazzolla intended to revolutionize the tango world.

For Piazzolla the composer, playing the bandoneón was an obvious choice, an immediate way of participating in the performance of his own works as a leader and, from this advantageous position, creating by means of the performance. It is important to keep in sight two relevant facts: First, the bandoneón is not just “an” essential tango instrument, but it is “the” quintessential tango instrument – at least for tangos written since 1920 to date – and it is the source of numerous instrumental idiomatic elements in this genre. Second, the insistence of Piazzolla, throughout his career, but especially since his return to Argentina in 1955, in defending the rooting of his work in tango. His choice of the bandoneón implied, thus, a sort of profession of aesthetic faith. This choice establishes and decrees the affiliation of his work with tango history.

Furthermore, in the words of Omar Corrado, “the use [by Piazzolla] of the instrument [i.e. the bandoneón] implied also accepting the heritage of its use in the history of tango, of the style of the great bandoneonists.”<sup>40</sup> Piazzolla was an almost autodidactic bandoneón player. This may explain his unique style, both individual and individualistic. Essentially, he developed his way of “singing” and expressing the melody during his time with A. Troilo, although his temperament and a natural aggressive quality place him closer to P. Laurenz. He remained true to the playing posture he had adopted around 1954: standing on one leg, straight on the floor, the other leg half-bent resting on a chair, and the instrument on it. In 1959 Piazzolla tried to turn the bandoneón into an electrical instrument by means of attaching contact microphones to it, but, unhappy with the alteration

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<sup>40</sup> Omar Corrado, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

of the genuine bandoneón sound that this innovation brought in, he soon discarded it.

To a certain degree, the adoption, adaptation and development of the tango bandoneón traditions by Piazzolla came to constitute, thanks to his wide musical knowledge and instrumental virtuosity, a system of sorts, one of the pillars of the famous Piazzollean phrasing. We can be certain that the bandoneón as a sonority is structural to Piazzolla's music, both to his performance style and to his aesthetic and music writing. The historical heritage of the performance traditions of the bandoneón pervades his works to such an extent that it would not be an exaggeration to say that a full analysis and comprehension of Piazzolla's works, as well as a proper performance of them, are impossible without a thorough examination of the bandoneón, its role in tango music and its different performance styles and traditions.

It is therefore important to undertake at least a brief examination of the style of the leading bandoneón players that Piazzolla identified, at different moments of his career, as his mentors or important sources of influence on him. The biographies and stylistic features of Aníbal Troilo, Pedro Maffia, Pedro Laurenz, Roberto Di Filippo, Ciríaco Ortiz and Leopoldo Federico will be briefly considered, trying to relate their influences to specific aspects of Piazzolla's work either as a composer, a bandoneón soloist, or both.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>The core of the factual information in the following section is based on information provided by the Buenos Aires Municipality-sponsored website [www.todotango.org](http://www.todotango.org) <<http://www.todotango.org/>> and was augmented for use in this document with analysis and research by the author, including oral sources.

*Aníbal Troilo (1914 - 1975)*

Aníbal Carmelo Troilo, known as “Pichuco,” the “Bandoneón Mayor de Buenos Aires” (the Senior Bandoneón Player of Buenos Aires), was born in 1914 in the traditional quarter of El Abasto and was recruited as a boy by Juan Maglio Pacho, conductor of one of the first tango orchestras in Buenos Aires, to play the bandoneón. Thereafter he played in various orchestras until 1937, when he established his own ensemble. He exercised a strong influence on the development of the tango. Troilo died in 1975.

He was, like Gardel, an archetypical figure of tango, a person whose human qualities transcended the purely artistic realm. As a bandoneonist he created a style so radically authentic that it bordered perfection: he possessed both Maffia's velvety sound and his mastery for *legato*, and combined Laurenz's brilliancy of sound and knife-sharp *stacatti* with Ciriaco Ortiz's phrasing in octaves and his characteristic “speech-like singing” of the melody. Unlike these players, he was not a great technician on the instrument, but he managed to create an entirely personal, charmed style. He was, precisely, a master of personality and feeling in his expression. He treated *tempo* with the freedom of a true interpreter, using dynamic shading and his distinctive stretched phrasing to emphasize and instill deliberateness to each phrase and meaning to each note.

As an orchestra leader, he developed a balanced, genuine tango style of an undeniable taste, without histrionics. He knew how to choose the best players according to his musical ideas, and he selected good singers, who beside him

achieved their best.<sup>42</sup> Finally, he was an inspired composer, creator of pieces made to last forever like “Responso” (1951), and his renditions of other composers’ works became masterpieces for all time.

Troilo and his orchestra played a key role in Piazzolla’s artistic life. Piazzolla, still a teenager, joined Troilo’s orchestra in 1939 and played there for five years. Coincidentally, Piazzolla started his formal training as a composer under the guidance of Alberto Ginastera. Piazzolla felt that the exquisite but conservative style of Troilo’s orchestra (aimed at the dancers in the first place) limited his development as a musician, and also tied him to the world of the night clubs and cabarets, from which he wanted to move and become a “serious” composer. Piazzolla would write arrangements for Troilo’s orchestra, incorporating all the new harmonic and rhythmic elements he was discovering with Ginastera. These arrangements would undergo severe cuts by Troilo, to Piazzolla’s frustration. As the young musician grew up, this situation could not last, and it came to an end in 1944. Piazzolla’s attitude toward Troilo in the future remained somehow ambivalent, but Troilo’s orchestra still premiered some of the most famous compositions by Piazzolla (among these, notably, “Triunfal” and “Preparense”). Piazzolla, although disapproving of Troilo’s attachment to a style of tango that, for him, had long died out, remained grateful to the old master, and, after his death, dedicated a “Suite Troileana” to him. Here is how Piazzolla characterized Troilo’s influence:

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<sup>42</sup>According to the famous tango pianist Osvaldo Berlinghieri (personal communication), Troilo was not very schooled as a professional musician, but he had an extremely precise idea of what he wanted from his orchestra.

Troilo didn't teach me anything, although I caught him in his best period, because ever since then he only repeated himself. What I learnt from his is his way of saying, the pure essence he had in playing tango<sup>43</sup>

*Pedro Maffia (1899 – 1967)*

Pedro Maffia was above all a stylist of the bandoneón, a creator who, since the 1920s, discovered many unknown possibilities on the instrument, and arrived at the creation of a school of playing that brought together emotion and technique. It was he who introduced the *fraseo*<sup>44</sup> to bandoneón playing. He had a decisive influence in the creation of the De Caro school, as a first bandoneón of Julio De Caro's influential sextet.

An outstanding trait of Maffia's playing was his small, velvety-dull sound, one of an extreme purity, without any reminiscence of the *Guardia Vieja*<sup>45</sup> sound.<sup>46</sup> He did not stretch the bellow of the instrument excessively or close it abruptly. However, the era of the big orchestras, with ten or more instrumentalists, which began in the mid-1930s, was not favorable for him. Maffia's was a chamber bandoneón, whose velvety sound was lost in big line-ups and in large rooms.

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<sup>43</sup>Quoted by Alberto Speratti, *Con Piazzolla*, (Buenos Aires: Editorial Galerna, 1969), 35

<sup>44</sup>*Fraseo* or *fraseado*: specific type of rubato phrasing that anticipates the normal metric accents.

<sup>45</sup>*Guardia Vieja*: The Old Guard. See "Terminology."

<sup>46</sup>Until the second decade of the twentieth century bandoneón players had a tendency to imitate the flute and the barrel organ with their instrument. This is confirmed by the direct testimony of my grandfather Alberto Drago, who used to play violin in such an ensemble in his early teenaged years.

He created the *arrastre* (dragging), an effect consisting of increasing the volume in a chord, sustaining it briefly, to then suddenly cut it.<sup>47</sup> He was also one of the first to play bandoneón “a cappella.”

Other transcendental contributions are the *bandoneón variations*, some of which are still played today, seventy years later, for ex.: “Amurado” or “La Maleva.” Maffia was also an innovator in matters of tonality, incorporating harmonic variety, extended chords and modulation to tango. Aníbal Troilo dedicated the tango “A Pedro Maffia” to him. For decades he was a bandoneón teacher and he wrote an important method to learn it. It is impossible to conceive the modern technique of bandoneón playing and with it Piazzolla as a bandoneonist, without Maffia’s harmonic, stylistic, technical and didactical contributions.

*Pedro Laurenz (1902 - 1972)*

Pedro Laurenz (his true name was Pedro Blanco) was born into a musical family in the La Boca neighborhood of Buenos Aires in 1902, later moving to Uruguay, where he was attracted to the bandoneón. He made his debut in Buenos Aires at the age of twenty, playing with Julio De Caro’s orchestra, in a duet with Pedro Maffia known as “*Los dos Pedritos*.”

It would be exact and fair to say that, during the two years that they were members of the De Caro Sextet, Pedro Laurenz, together with Pedro Maffia, set the definitive basis of the bandoneón tango playing. They improved the sound production techniques, perfected the fingering and standardized different *touches*

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<sup>47</sup>The *arrastre* will be discussed in the section about tango performance practices.

and the corresponding techniques for their performance. On the technical level, their main contribution was undoubtedly the principle of independence of the hands, freeing the left hand of the bandoneonist from the poor and enslaving role of a homophonic harmonizer, and thus indirectly enabling the polyphonic elaborations of Piazzolla and other followers. It was, however, only in 1926, after Maffia left De Caro's Sextet, that Laurenz's own style and artistic personality emerged, with its brilliant sonority, energetic touché, vehement phrasing and "angry" closing of the bellows – a style paradoxically antinomic to that of Maffia.

Laurenz formed his own orchestra in 1934, at the bar "Los treinta y seis billares," as though envisaging that the instrumental tango needed a new style, thus giving start to twenty-five years of performance and a series of compositions of deep melancholy. From 1960 Laurenz formed part of the famous "Quinteto Real" a group of great soloists, such as Horacio Salgán (piano), Enrique Mario Francini (violin), Ubaldo De Lío (guitar) and Rafael Ferro (double bass). They recorded for Phillips and Columbia, in an attempt to make tango re-flourish with a bold renewal in rhythm. The Quinteto Real still exists but the only who remain from its original stars are Salgán and De Lío.

*Roberto Di Filippo (1924 – 1991)*

Roberto Di Filippo gained recognition in the world of classical music as oboist with the Teatro Colón Symphony Orchestra. By the time he obtained this position, he had already sold his bandoneón, supposedly having exhausted its technical possibilities. Di Filippo represented the acme of the virtuosic trend in

bandoneón playing initiated by Arturo Bernstein at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Di Filippo's superior mastery showed itself in Piazzolla's first orchestra in 1946, and later with Horacio Salgán, in whose orchestra he played first bandoneón since 1950.

Piazzolla liked to go to movies and to discuss classical music with Di Filippo. By introducing Di Filippo to an oboist at the Teatro Colón, he was to change his friend's career. Di Filippo took up the oboe, and in 1952 joined the Teatro Colón Symphony Orchestra. Two years later, when he married, he sold his four bandoneons to help meet his expenses. After twenty years away from the instrument, he again took up the bandoneón. By then he had turned into a sort of patriarchal figure for the new generations of bandoneón players.

He stood out for his absolute technical command, his breathtaking fingering speed and the total independence of his hands. Also, unlike most bandoneonists – even among the best – that tend to play primarily opening the bellows, Di Filippo was capable of an equally good sound both opening and closing the bellows.

Di Filippo's influence on Piazzolla's own bandoneón style was significant. In particular, he inspired Piazzolla's use of the right hand. Astor Piazzolla called him the best bandoneón virtuoso ever. In a letter to Di Filippo, because he was so impressed by Di Filippo's skills, Piazzolla wrote: "I would really like to yank out my fingers and throw them in the river."

*Ciríaco Ortiz (1908 – 1970)*

Ortiz's full name was Ángel Ciríaco Ortiz Barrionuevo, and his nickname was "Ciríaquito." He was born on August 2, 1908, in Córdoba. He was an excellent bandoneón player since childhood. In 1920, Carlos Bozán called him from Buenos Aires to be a part of his orchestra. He was a member of different tango orchestras, including Vardaro – Pugliese's Sextet and Mariano Mores's orchestra. As a composer, he wrote: "Atenti Pebeta" ("Pay attention, girl"), "Nena" ("Girl"), "Sueños" ("Dreams"), "Corazón" ("Heart"), "Lobo" ("Wolf"), "No me preguntes nada" ("Do not ask me anything"), "Entre copa y copa" ("Between drinks"), and other tangos.

About his playing it was said that

it would be absolutely impossible to transcribe on a music staff what he plays on his instrument. What he contributes is the way of phrasing, of dividing the melody, of finding nuances, of harmonizing. It is a style with reminiscences of the guitar plucking of the milonguero criollo, which even though it has had no followers it may have much influenced Aníbal Troilo.<sup>48</sup>

Ciríaco Ortiz is credited with the creation of the octave appoggiatura effect, known among bandoneón players nowadays as "Octava de Ciríaco" (*Ciríaco octave*). This effect was tastefully adopted by Aníbal Troilo, and Piazzolla later incorporated it, first into his performing style, and later, as an idiomatic borrowing into his compositions.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Article "Ciríaco Ortiz" Todotango.com  
<<http://www.todotango.com/ENGLISH/creadores/cOrtiz.asp>> (accessed November 27, 2007)

<sup>49</sup>The *Ciríaco octave* and his application to the orchestral setting will be discussed in its own section of this document.

*Leopoldo Federico (1927 - )*

Bandoneón player, director and composer, Leopoldo Federico was born on January 12, 1927 in the suburb of Once. He received his music education from Felix Lipesker and Francisco Requena. At the age of seventeen he started his career in Adamo-Flores' orchestra in the Tabaris theater. He had a natural gift and a short time later he was required by the principal orchestras. As a result, he spent the following years working with Juan Carlos Cobián, Alfredo Gobbi, Alberto Marino, Emilio Balcarce, Osvaldo Manzi, Hector Stamponi, Miguel Caló, Lucio Demare, Mariano Mores, Carlos Di Sarli and Astor Piazzolla. In 1953 he created his own orchestra with the piano player Atilio Stampone.

In 1970 he made some registers for four bandoneons with Piazzolla, Antonio Ríos and Rodolfo Mederos. As a composer he wrote: "Lo que no me hablaron de vos" ("What I wasn't told about you"), "Que me juzgue Dios" ("Let God judge me"), "Tango al cielo" ("Tango to the sky"), "Cautivante" ("Captivating"), "Calentísimo" ("Very hot"), and the waltz "Distancia" ("Distance").

His bandoneón playing is characterized by a pure, brilliant sonority, and an inexhaustible variety of timbres. He is one of the greatest soloists of all time, deploying an astonishing dexterity and command coupled with true emotion, and, together with Máximo Mori and Gabriel Clausi, one of the best arrangers for bandoneón. In his bandoneón variations, he includes daring musical ideas and elaborate ornamentation. Mr. Federico deserves to be in the hall of fame of the greatest bandoneón players of tango alongside Maffia, Laurenz, Ciríaco Ortiz and Troilo.

## A History of Piazzolla's Ensembles

In 1944, after his association with Aníbal Troilo dissolved, Piazzolla teamed up with one of the singers of Pichuco's orchestra, Francisco Florentino and formed his first musical group, which he directed for three years. Piazzolla's compositions started to display a distinct treatment of harmony and instrumentation and an innovative approach to musical arranging. This new sophisticated, modern music, so different from traditional tango, caught the attention of many followers of the genre.

Piazzolla composed "El Desbande" in 1946. He used to call it his "first tango," because it was created on a more elaborate formal basis, different from the simpler formal models that were the norm in tango. Shortly thereafter, he started writing scores for the film industry.

In 1949, he dissolved his orchestra and distanced himself from the bandoneón. He wanted to forget tango. He was looking for another avenue for his creative powers, more in line with his models of serious composers such as Béla Bartók and Igor Stravinsky.

After winning the Fabian Sevitzyk Competition, Piazzolla received a scholarship as a part of his prize, and in 1954, he moved to Paris with his wife to study composition with Nadia Boulanger. This encounter bears repeated emphasis because of its far-reaching consequences, for Piazzolla as well as for the history of tango:

When I met her, I showed her my kilos of symphonies and sonatas. She started to read them and suddenly came out with a horrible sentence: 'It's very well written.' And stopped, with a big period, round like a soccer ball. After a long while, she said: 'Here you are

like Stravinsky, like Bartók, like Ravel, but you know what happens? I can't find Piazzolla in this.' And she began to investigate my private life: what I did, what I did and did not play, if I was single, married, or living with someone, she was like an FBI agent! And I was very ashamed to tell her that I was a tango musician. Finally I said, 'I play in a 'night club.' I didn't wanted to say 'cabaret.' And she answered, 'Night club, *mais oui*, but that is a cabaret, isn't it?' 'Yes,' I answered, and thought 'I'll hit this woman in the head with a radio...' It wasn't easy to lie to her. She kept asking: "You say that you are not pianist. What instrument do you play, then?" And I didn't want to tell her that I was a bandoneón player, because I thought, "Then she will throw me from the fourth floor." Finally, I confessed and she asked me to play some bars of a tango of my own. She suddenly opened her eyes, took my hand and told me: "You idiot, that's Piazzolla!" And I took all the music I composed, ten years of my life, and sent it to hell in two seconds. [...] She taught me to believe in Astor Piazzolla, to believe that my music wasn't as bad as I thought. I thought that I was something like a piece of crap because I played tangos in a cabaret, but I had something called style. I felt a sort of liberation of the ashamed tango player I was. I suddenly got free and I told myself: "Well, you'll have to keep dealing with this music, then."<sup>50</sup>

After a year spent studying with Boulanger in Paris, Piazzolla returned to Buenos Aires and created the "Octeto de Buenos Aires" (Buenos Aires Octet – OBA). In his own testimony, he got the idea of such an ensemble after listening to Gerry Mulligan's Octet. The OBA had at its core the *sexteto típico* (two bandoneons, two violins, piano and double bass) with the addition of a violoncello and, surprisingly for most tango lovers, an electric guitar. The main influences that Piazzolla had been exposed to up to this time were present in the OBA, especially the jazz influences, the polyphonic Baroque writing, the rhythmic influences of Bartók and Stravinsky and the advanced tonal harmonic language he learned under Boulanger.

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<sup>50</sup>Interview with Astor Piazzolla. © 1989 Gonzalo Saavedra, published in "El Mercurio," Chile, translation by Gonzalo Saavedra and David Taylor.

This ensemble, though short-lived, marked a watershed in the history of tango, and the birth of the *Nuevo Tango* can be dated from its start. Piazzolla dissolved the OBA in 1958, when, rejected by the public and criticized by his colleagues, he decided to emigrate to the United States.

In 1960, Piazzolla returned to Buenos Aires and formed a new ensemble; a quintet (the already mentioned Astor Piazzolla Quintet, or A.P.Q.), composed of bandoneón, electric guitar, violin, double bass and piano. This ensemble existed, with different musicians, in two periods: 1960 – 1970, and 1978 – 1988. This group is widely considered to be the synthesis of Piazzolla's music. Particularly during the second ten-year period of its existence, Piazzolla rearranged old compositions for the A.P.Q. and wrote new ones.

Between the two editions of his quintet, Piazzolla experimented with two other ensembles. In 1971 he created his Noneto (Nonet) also called "Ensemble 9" consisting of bandoneón, two violins, viola, cello, double bass, piano, percussion and electric guitar. This ensemble was Piazzolla's attempt to incorporate the advances of electronic music in the field of academic composition and to reach out to the rock audiences. His deteriorating health and economic difficulties led him to dissolve this ensemble in 1973, and he left Buenos Aires for Rome, where he signed a contract with the music publisher Aldo Pagani.

After recording an original and successful album with the saxophonist Gerry Mulligan in 1974, and under the influence of the music of Quincy Jones, Al Di Meola and Chick Corea, Piazzolla decided to create the Electronic Octet, composed of bandoneón, electric bass, electric piano, organ, synthesizer, drum

set, and electric guitar (later replaced by a flute, exchangeable with saxophone). Apparently, Piazzolla feared that he would betray his own style yielding to this new influence and gave up the Electronic Octet in 1977.

Piazzolla again reunited the A.P.Q. in 1978, and, among the highlights of this second period are the 1983 performance in Teatro Colón of Buenos Aires, the 1986 live recording in the Monteux Festival with vibraphonist Gary Burton, and the 1987 Central Park concert, a classic in its own right. In 1988, after recording what was to be the A.P.Q.'s last CD "La Camorra," Piazzolla dissolved the ensemble. The reason for the dissolution of this successful group was heart surgery Piazzolla had to undergo – the non-stop touring of the Quintet posed extreme demands on the 67-year-old Piazzolla's health. Also, according to the testimony of the musicians that accompanied Piazzolla in the last tour of the Quintet, his constant musical exploration was a factor in his decision.

In 1989, he created the New Tango Sextet. This ensemble did not include a violin, the only bowed-string instruments being the violoncello and the double bass. The group was completed with a piano, electric guitar and two bandoneons. The second bandoneón was assigned the harmonic support in order to reduce Piazzolla's physical effort in consideration of his deteriorating health.

The New Tango Sextet had a particularly dark tone. The only instrument to visit the higher registers was the bandoneón and only in its solos. Another original feature of Piazzolla's last ensemble was the inclusion of Gerardo

Gandini, an acclaimed composer and pianist, who specialized in contemporary music and brought in a completely different approach to interpretation.

Piazzolla dissolved the New Tango Sextet in 1990. In 1990 and 1991, he performed almost exclusively as a soloist, collaborating with chamber orchestras, symphony orchestras and chamber ensembles, and in 1991 he suffered a stroke in Paris, which led to his death in 1992.

*Synopsis of Piazzolla's ensembles.*

- **Fiorentino – Piazzolla** (1944 – 1946); **Orquesta Típica de Astor Piazzolla** (1946 – 1949) 4 violins, cello, 4 bandoneons, double bass, piano
- **Octeto Buenos Aires (OBA)** (1955-58): 2 bandoneons, 2 violins, cello, double bass, piano, electric guitar
- **Astor Piazzolla Quintet (A.P.Q)** (1960-70 and 1978-88): bandoneón, violin, double bass, piano, electric guitar.
- **Noneto** (1971-72): bandoneón, 2 violins, viola, cello, double bass, piano, percussion, electric guitar.
- **Octeto Electrónico** (1974 – 77): bandoneón, electric bass, electric piano, organ, synthesizer, drum set, electric guitar (later replaced by flute and sax)
- **Sexteto** (1989 – 1990) 2 bandoneons, cello, double bass, piano, electric guitar.

### The Problem of Musical Notation in Piazzolla

In his excellent article on Piazzolla's music, Omar García Brunelli, addressing the problem of musical notation, wrote:

[...] still more than in the case of academic music, what happens with urban popular music is that even what is written on the score does not offer a good enough representation of the sonic reality, because in popular music the performer stays above the work, and stamps on it his personal seal, whereas in academic music the essential element is the composition, which travels through the centuries in the hands of the performers.<sup>51</sup>

This is a very convenient place to quote, once again, Ramón Pelinski, who lucidly observed:

Tango is a popular music that borrows from academic music the writing and some compositional procedures. Thus, as a general rule, the tango composer writes his music and determines its instrumentation, while, customarily, the musicians play with their parts open on their stands, even if they know their parts by heart. Tango assumes, indeed, an intermediate position between jazz and classical music, between the interpreter-performer and the composer, between improvisation and music notation.

In tango, there are specific manners of performance that communicate the "tango emotion" in music, without which it is impossible to recognize it as tango. These are idiomatic manners of tango performance – assimilated by means of the performer's proficiency – that constitute concrete ways of playing which respond to the 'habitus' (*sociological term that designates a set of acquired patterns of thought, behavior, and taste – A.D.*) of the interpreter; mental schemes that are, in turn, the product of the interiorization of tango by means of its socio-cultural practice, and function as organizing principles of its production. It is clear that these manners of interpretation do not need to be graphically represented in order to be able to become sonic actualizations.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Omar García Brunelli, op. cit. p. 158.

<sup>52</sup>"Le tango est un musique populaire que emprunte à la musique savante l'écriture et certains procédés de composition. Ainsi, en règle général, le compositeur de tango écrit sa musique et fixe son instrumentation, tandis que, par tradition, les musiciens jouent avec leur partitions ouvertes sur le pupitre, même s'ils connaissent leur partie par coeur. Le tango assume, en effet, une position intermédiaire entre le jazz et la musique classique, entre l'interprète et le compositeur, entre l'improvisation e l'écriture

These two quotations introduce us to the problem of musical notation in tango. On one hand, we have the traditional Western system of musical notation, which tango performers and composers borrowed from classical music. On the other hand, we have a whole system of practices and assumptions that are not purposely reflected by musical notation. Additionally, there is a whole corpus of performance traditions that we learn to attach to, or deduce from, classical music text, traditions that are alien or plainly opposed to the unwritten practices and traditions of tango music. At the center of this dichotomy is the tango performer-improviser-reader-composer, a figure that resists classification into the narrow categories that, historically, the market division of professional musical work has created.

The role and bearing of the performance factor for the work of Astor Piazzolla has been sufficiently discussed in previous chapters. The main focus here will be outlining an approach to the problems of music writing that this work poses to the performer – especially for a performer that has been trained outside the domain of tango traditions – based on Charles Seeger's ideas exposed in his classical article "Prescriptive and Descriptive Music-Writing."<sup>53</sup>

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Il y a dans le tango des modalités d'exécution spécifiques sans lesquelles on ne peut reconnaître qu'il s'agit d'un tango, et qui communiquent l'émotion *tanguéra*. Il s'agit de modalités idiomatiques de l'interprétation du tango, intériorisées par la compétence de l'interprète, que constituent des façons de jouer concrètes qui répondent à un 'habitus' de l'interprète, des schémas mentaux, qui sont, à leur tour, le produit de l'intériorisation du tango à travers sa pratique socio-culturelle et qui fonctionnent comme des principes organisateurs de sa production. Il est clair que ces modalités d'interprétation n'ont pas besoin d'être l'objet d'une représentation graphique pour pouvoir devenir des actualisations sonores." Pelinski, Ramón (2003) op. cit. p. 46

<sup>53</sup> Charles Seeger, "Prescriptive and Descriptive Music-Writing," *The Musical Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (April 1958): 184–195.

In the aforementioned article, Dr. Seeger points out three hazards inherent to our practice of music-writing:

The first lies in an assumption that the full auditory parameter of music is or can be represented by a partial visual parameter, i.e., by one with only two dimensions, as upon a flat surface. The second lies in ignoring the historical lag of music-writing behind speech-writing, and the consequent traditional interposition of the art of speech in the matching of auditory and visual signals in music-writing. The third lies in our having failed to distinguish between prescriptive and descriptive uses of music writing, which is to say, between a blue-print of how a specific piece of music shall be made to sound and a report of how a specific performance of it actually did sound.<sup>54</sup>

These 'hazards' deserve a detailed commentary. The possibility of sufficient graphic representation is contingent upon the sharing, between writer and reader, of reading codes and extra-textual elements. Among those extra-textual elements, one of the most important in music is a consensus regarding the ranking of relevance of the different sound parameters. An example from the field of comparative linguistics can illuminate this point: for a native Spanish- or Russian-speaker, the most important sonoric feature in an utterance is the stress accent. This accent differentiates the meaning of otherwise identically sounding words (Sp. *trabajo*: "I work," *trabajó*: "he/she worked;" Russ. *sélo*: "(it) sat," *seló*: "village"), while the relative pitch and overall melodic contour of the sentence are rather connected to the emotional charge of the utterance, than to its actual meaning. In Mandarin Chinese, though, the priorities are exactly inverted; the stress accent is not grammatically fixed, but depends on which part of the sentence receives the main emotional load, whereas the relative pitch height of

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<sup>54</sup>Charles Seeger, op. cit., p. 184.

each syllable and the overall melodic design are semantically relevant and cannot be changed without actually changing the meaning of the whole sentence (Mandarin Ch.: 搭 *dā*: to hang over something, 答 *dá*: to answer, 打 *dǎ*: to hit, 大 *dà*: big).<sup>55</sup> Thus, in learning each other's language, one of the first barriers that speakers of tone-languages (Mandarin, Cantonese, Thai, Vietnamese, etc.) and stress-languages (most Western languages) need to overcome is the tendency to apply the ranking of sound parameters from their own language to the new language.

Exactly the same kind of unconscious transference is found in the process of reading the musical text, whose components were annotated according to a ranking of sound parameters specific to the musical culture of the writer-author that he assumed was shared by the reader-performer.

Concerning the second of the hazards mentioned by Seeger, a short article by Martín Kutnowski makes a point, the importance of which is hard to overstate. Discussing the characteristics of instrumental rubato in Piazzolla's performances and the long-reaching influence that this manner of phrasing (*fraseos* or *fraseados*) had on the very structure of Piazzolla's melodic phrase, he asks rhetorically:

“How was that such transformations still belonged to the tango? It was because most of New Tango rhythmic innovations were rooted in, or simply copied, from the kinds of rhythmic irregularities present in any 'authentic' vocal performance.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>The diacritic marks over the syllable *da* indicate its intonation, which roughly coincides with the lines' shape: high, ascending, descending-ascending, and descending.

<sup>56</sup>Martín Kutnowski, “Instrumental Rubato and Phrase Structure in Astor Piazzolla's Music,” *Latin American Music Review/Revista de Música Latinoamericana* 23, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2002): 108.

Further support for this idea came from the already quoted article by Charles Seeger, who pointed out the probability

“that speech conceptions of melody have played an important part not only in the development of the technique of writing but also in the composition and performance of melodies in writing [...] speech-conceptions of melody may sometimes outweigh music-conceptions of it, particularly in any discussion of the problem of music-writing.”<sup>57</sup>

This is the basic concept that I introduced in a lecture at the Emory University, Atlanta in 2002;<sup>58</sup> that in order to understand the original yet standardized ways in which tango musicians read (and depart from) the printed music text, one has to be familiar with the particularities of the spoken accent of the *porteños*, the inhabitants of the city of Buenos Aires. The regular melodic and rhythmic traits of this specific variant of the Spanish language show an astonishing similarity, even a straight parallel, with the rhythmic-melodic design of the tango *fraseado*, which was later incorporated – to a certain extent – into the tango notation used by most modern tango musicians, including Piazzolla. This insight, at first just merely an intuition, became later reinforced when I had access to technical documentation produced by the *Laboratorio de Investigaciones Sensoriales*<sup>59</sup> about the changes that had to be introduced in a voice-recognition software designed in Spain, in order for this software to be of any use to speakers who had a Buenos Aires accent. The document offered a

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<sup>57</sup>Charles Seeger, op. cit. p. 184.

<sup>58</sup>Alejandro Drago, *Tango – A Three-Faceted Phenomenon*, Lecture, 2002. Unpublished.

<sup>59</sup>*Laboratory of Sensorial Research*, a dependence of the Argentine CONICET - Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, project PAV 127.

statistical survey of the basic pitch, rhythm and accent patterns of this dialect, and contained a table of these patterns in a mathematical description. The astonishing thing about this document is that, once these patterns were translated into musical notation, they represented a comprehensive collection of the main tango musical gestures in rhythm and melody.<sup>60</sup>

As for the third of the hazards of music transcription, after C. Seeger:

[...] our conventional notation [...] is practically entirely prescriptive in character. [...] It does not tell us as much about how music sounds as how to make it sound. Yet no one can make it sound as the writer of the notation intended unless in addition to a knowledge of the tradition of writing he has also a knowledge of the oral (or, better, aural) tradition associated with it—i.e., a tradition learned by the ear of the student, partly from his elders in general but especially from the precepts of his teachers.<sup>61</sup>

It is hard to imagine a better way to present the whole spectrum of factors relevant to the problem of musical notation in Piazzolla. As we will see through many examples, Piazzolla's notation is often intended as a guide to "making-it-sound," i. e. prescriptive in nature. Yet it is not in any way erratic or fortuitous. His notation, in fact, offers all the necessary guidance to the performer, provided that he or she is knowledgeable of the tradition associated with this music – in our case, the tango tradition. Furthermore, Dr. Seeger points at two levels of sources for tradition (inasmuch as it applies to one particular performer, composer or work): the student's "elders" in general, and the student's teachers in particular. The application of this approach to Piazzolla, his performance and

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<sup>60</sup>For further detail about the methodology and findings of this research, see: Laura Colantoni and Jorge Gurlekian, "Convergence and intonation: historical evidence from Buenos Aires Spanish," *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 7, no. 2 (2004): 107–119.

<sup>61</sup>Charles Seeger, op. cit. p. 186.

his compositional work reveals the complexity of what might be called, with all due respect, his musical pedigree. Indeed, Piazzolla was a mostly self-taught bandoneón player, but he was initiated into the mysteries of tango by Aníbal Troilo, who acted effectively as a mystagogue<sup>62</sup> for him. Troilo, and a handful of other bandoneón players, whose biographies and artistic contributions were the object of a preceding chapter, acted as Piazzolla's 'elders' from which he received and learned the bandoneón tradition, including technique, sound and style, on the grounds of which he would develop his unique style as a bandoneón player. However, as true as it is that this group of people may be considered his surrogate teachers, it is also true that the uniqueness of Piazzolla's performance style derives from his intimate knowledge of the traditions of the classical music and jazz, musical traditions in which the bandoneón had, at the time of Piazzolla's establishment as a musician, nearly no history whatsoever. Therefore, whereas no particular jazz teacher of Piazzolla is known, he did have teachers in the field of classical music, the most important of them being Alberto Ginastera in Argentina, and Nadia Boulanger in France. These two teachers strongly influenced Piazzolla's preferences in classical music and his understanding of it, and are therefore important references when dealing with Piazzolla's music.

The merging of Piazzolla's music into the stream of the symphonic repertoire, both due to his own symphonic writing and to the countless existing arrangements (created either by himself or by other arrangers) of his chamber

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<sup>62</sup>*mys-ta-gogue* (mĭs'tə-gŏg', -gôg') n. 1. One who prepares candidates for initiation into a mystery cult. 2. One who holds or spreads mystical doctrines. The American Heritage Dictionary.

works, make the problem of musical notation a very actual one. Orchestral musicians do not have the time nor the opportunity to research notational problems of this kind, and whenever they have to play an orchestral work that resorts to unorthodox performance procedures, they usually rely on the composer's specific instructions for performance (almost totally absent in Piazzolla's orchestral parts), sets of special conventions or specific symbols (very rare and mostly unsystematic in our author's work), or the conductor's instructions (the conductor himself often being as ignorant as, if not more than, his players in these matters.)

Charles Seeger addressed this problem in the context of scientific ethnomusicology and the need to annotate field recordings. The next quotation applies as well to the notational problems being discussed, if the word 'scientific' is substituted with 'artistically sound:'

In employing this mainly prescriptive notation as a descriptive sound-writing of any music other than the Occidental fine and popular arts of music we do two things, both thoroughly unscientific. First, we single out what appear to us to be structures in the other music that resemble structures familiar to us in the notation of the Occidental art and write these down, ignoring everything else for which we have no symbols. Second, we expect the resulting notation to be read by people who *do not carry the tradition of the other music*. [italics by C. Seeger] The result, as read, can only be a conglomeration of structures part European, part non-European, connected by a movement 100% European. To such a riot of subjectivity it is presumptuous indeed to ascribe the designation "scientific."<sup>63</sup>

As it was previously said, the amount of information and guidance provided by Piazzolla is entirely satisfactory to everyone in touch with the musical

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<sup>63</sup>Charles Seeger, op. cit. p. 186.

traditions wherein this notation is framed. But if we intend musical notation to be a bridge, a tool for communicating new musical ideas and to spread formerly unknown musical traditions – either with a scientific or artistic purpose, – particularly in an orchestral setting, then what ought to be done? Dr. Seeger's answer is:

There are three ways out of this dilemma [...] we may increase the already heavy over-load of symbols in the notation [...] we may dispense with many of the symbols and extend the graphic potentialities of the notation [...] but for purposes of formal description [...] the objectivity of the electronic reduction of the oscillographic curve, especially of the sound-track of high-fidelity sound-recording, is vastly superior.<sup>64</sup>

This paragraph deserves commentary. In our case, the first proposed solution essentially would equal the preparation of a critical edition of Piazzolla's works. It is my opinion that there is much need for such a critical edition, if Piazzolla's work is to establish itself firmly in the concert repertoire of this new century and if the performance practices related to his works are to survive. The second solution (extending the graphic potential of music writing) would be extremely useful for ethnomusicological purposes, particularly in dealing with the improvisational aspects of Piazzolla's performance and with his specific type of rubato. However, from the point of view of the whole process of preparation of a concert performance, particularly by large ensembles, extending the graphic aspects of the notation seems highly impractical. The third solution (electronic representation) may seem paradoxical from the point of view of practicality, and therefore dispensable. Nevertheless, in the context of all that has been said

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 187.

about Piazzolla as a composer and performer and the bearing of his performances on the proper reading of his scores, Piazzolla's recordings should be considered the ultimate form of notation of his works, provided that we are able to deal with them as such. A musician that would approach these recordings in search of guidance for his performance should be able to explore the musical line of reasoning behind every aspect of the performance, in the same way as we analyze the form of a composition. That means that the recordings need to be "read," not blindly imitated. This kind of reading is possible only in the context of a proper understanding of the performance traditions, the background from which a particular case of performance is drawn. Otherwise, we are at risk to fall in the trap of the "fetish of extreme accuracy in the writing of music" described by C.

Seeger:

[...]he great music traditions, their practice by those who have carried them, and the phenomenological and axiological norms incorporated in them were not determined by the exceptional human being. He contributes to them. We may never cease the controversy how much. The same is true of our notation, which is, *par excellence*, a matter of norms determined by the vast aggregate of practice and codified by generations of workers. The graph,<sup>65</sup> on the other hand, shows individual performance. Each graph, whether of the exceptional performer or the merest tyro, is unique. Norms can be arrived at by comparative studies of large numbers of graphs. But these norms may differ in many important respects from the norms embodied in the notation. Or they may confirm them. In any event, where the individual notation may give too much norm and too little detail, the individual graph may easily give too little norm and too much detail.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup>Dr. Seeger used the expression "graph" since he was dealing with both hand graphs made by ear from phonograph recordings, and automatic graphs, better known as oscillograms, made by electronic-mechanical means. At the time of writing the cited article (1958), the oscillograms were still, in Dr. Seeger's words, "at the pioneer stages of development." His ideas, though, have not lost their value.

<sup>66</sup>Charles Seeger, op. cit. p. 192.

As a result, it can be said that Piazzolla presents a singular case of juxtaposition of traditions. Not merely from the interpretative point of view, but just to properly decode and read Piazzolla's text, the performer needs to familiarize himself with the traditions that nurtured his style (both performance and compositional): classical music, jazz and tango, the latter being the principal tradition with which Piazzolla himself wanted his music to be associated.

CHAPTER IV  
TANGO MANNER OF PERFORMANCE AND RHYTHMIC PATTERNS OF  
NUEVO TANGO

Elements of Tango Articulation

On stringed instruments, bowings are regarded as the most important element of musical diction. The overall shape and character of a phrase and every note within it is determined by the right selection of bow sector, bow quantity, acoustical design (meaning manner and degree of attack, sustain and release) reflected by the form of different bow parameters, and of course bow direction (up or down). Bowings being such a key element, it is only logical to conclude that their selection is a matter of the utmost importance, one that is intimately tied to a thorough understanding of the esthetics of the work being played and the musical style wherein it is framed. Indeed, the decisions about bowings in the modern symphony orchestra are made by the concertmaster, whose authority in these matters is only superseded by the conductor. It is assumed that a professional concertmaster has a superior understanding of the esthetic pillars of the work, and that this knowledge allows him to both provide a basic plan for the bowings of a given work and adjust them to better accommodate the conductor's musical requests. In other words, bowings are supposed to be the technical means to express a specific aesthetical comprehension of a work and its style. This is as true for symphonic music as it is for tango, certainly also for jazz, and probably for any music played on stringed instruments. It is therefore natural that different aesthetics, with their differing set

of musical parameters, conventions and ranking of priorities, demand the use of different bowings, and that bowings which seem natural and good for one type of music, will be inadequate, unnatural or plainly wrong for another type of music.

These simple truths are sometimes overlooked by both performers and conductors. Without delving into the reasons behind, the fact remains that many conductors and classically trained musicians tend to assume that the aesthetic standards for European symphonic music and techniques associated with it are universal, and apply them accordingly to every kind of music, regardless of its cultural background. In the best case, this is just the result of having insufficient information; in the worst, it reflects a disdain for cultural diversity.<sup>67</sup> In either case, the musical experience is impoverished by the lack of first-hand knowledge and by a routine tendency to standardize.

However, in the case of tango, it would be unfair to blame performers and conductors without pointing out that, unlike the corpus of academic musical knowledge and practices, until very recently there was no systematization in either methodical teaching or serious didactical literature on tango performance practices, and the construction of this tango scholarship is still in its early stages. The transmission of these practices was, and mostly remains, strictly oral. Cultural as well as idiomatic barriers have also prevented its assimilation by interested musicians who were not part of the culture that created tango, or were not exposed to it. One of the main goals of this document is to provide a

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<sup>67</sup>Once again we find here a parallel between the problems of the so called "ethnic" music (as if there were any music in this world that is not ethnic!) played by modern orchestras and early European music played by historically uninformed performers on the basis of less than accurate editions.

foundation toward a systematic approach to explain tango elements that will be encountered in the symphonic works of Astor Piazzolla.

Also, when dealing with tango music, especially when it is written or arranged for a non-tango ensemble such as a symphony orchestra, one has to keep in mind the phenomenon that could be called “inter-idiomatic borrowing.” This term refers to manners of performance and special effects in tango that, although played on a certain instrument or by a certain instrumental section, clearly stem from the instrumental idioms or gestures of another instrument. From an historical perspective, this phenomenon may be due to the convergence of two circumstances: the chamber nature of tango (keeping in mind that it was Piazzolla who turned tango into a symphonic concert genre) and the association of acoustically diverse instruments (such as bandoneón, piano and violin) within ensembles intended to play tango music for dancing, a kind of playing that demands great rhythmical precision and adjustment.

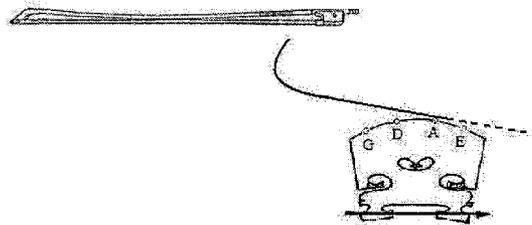
The historical aspects of the development of tango’s specific articulation, manners and musical gestures await their dedicated scholar. Still there is a collection of idioms, special effects and manners of performance that, based on contributions by different instruments, forms a shared vocabulary of borrowings. Therefore, in order to adequately understand and successfully undertake the performance of works such as Piazzolla’s symphonic compositions, it is necessary to know not only about the tango performance practices related to the specific instruments that take part in the orchestra, but also about tango performance practices, particularly about the bandoneón, which can be fairly

regarded as the mother source of most tango idioms. In the following paragraphs the key elements of tango articulation will be addressed.

### *Attack*

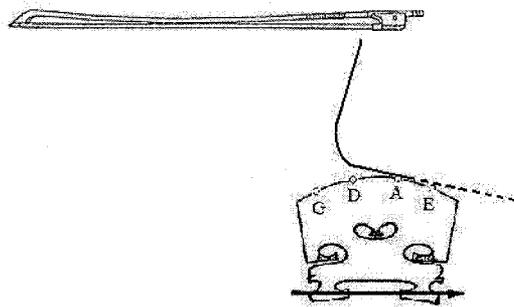
In *allegro tempi*, on strong beats and/or accented notes, the attack in all tango instruments (piano, bandoneón, violin, double bass, guitar, etc.) tends to be harder and more edgy than would be considered standard for classical playing on the same instruments. In fact, in stringed instruments this often means playing a number of bow retakes that would be considered excessive and unjustified in classical music.

In the case of the violin (and by extension, the rest of the stringed instruments), beginners are taught a smooth approach to the attack (see Fig. 2), even in “*forte*.” This is accomplished by means of a very fine-tuned curve of approach of the bow to the string, one that could be compared to the approach of a plane to the landing strip. The ultimate goal is to maximally avoid any roughness at the start of the note, and to make it an automatic movement for the player.



**Fig. 2 – Classical approach to the string**

On the contrary, in tango, a certain degree of harshness or roughness in the attack is expected, and it is surely regarded as a part of the acoustic model of this kind of attack. From an analytical point of view, this is achieved by means of irregularities in the optimal, smooth, classical curve of approach. This may imply, for example, a break in its line, giving the bow a more vertical entry onto the string, usually with the help of the fingers and wrist of the right hand (see Fig. 3).

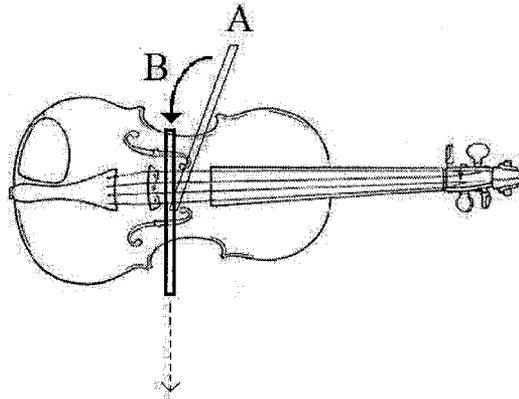


**Fig. 3 – Tango vertical attack**

In short notes, a momentary and energetic alteration of the angle between bow and string –either at the beginning or the end of the note – introduces a metallic flavor into the sound.<sup>68</sup> This metallic quality is also obtained by means of using a very short bow close to the frog, conducting the bow with the type of wrist movements characteristic of bow retakes, but short of obtaining a full sound. This manner of playing brings out the upper harmonics of the note only, without being “sul ponticello” in the classical sense (see Fig. 4).

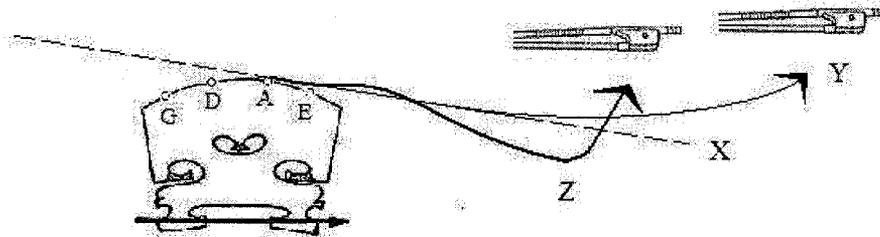
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<sup>68</sup>I would not discard the possibility that this characteristic sound could be a form of unconscious “word painting,” an evocation of the clash of knives in the street fights of the *compadritos*, or other elements of the urban sonic landscape.



**Fig. 4 – Alteration of bow angle (A – B: initial and final positions.)**

In cases where the note starts with the bow on the string, close to the frog, a similar pivoting movement of the right wrist, as if “digging” on the string, at the moment of setting the bow into motion creates an idiomatic acoustical “dirt” with resemblances of the *lija* sound, sometimes described as “arenita” (diminutive for “sand.”) See Fig. 5.



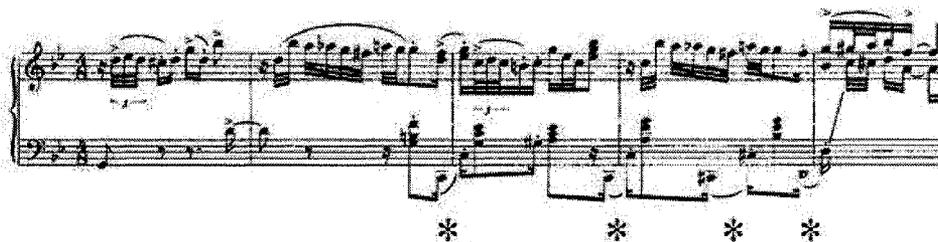
**Fig. 5 – X: plane of the A string. Y: normal curve of release of the bow. Z: “digging” effect with subsequent cut-off**

### *Arrastre (Dragging)*

Another important technique – very relevant for bandoneón, double bass and violin – is the *arrastre* (dragging). It is difficult to say whether the *arrastre* should be treated as a performance practice or as a special tango effect. Since in the *arrastre* we are dealing primarily with a rhythmic and articulation element rather than with an instrumental idiom, and since *arrastre* is not limited to any particular instrument (different instruments have different forms of playing it), in this document it will be treated among the performance practices. The *arrastre* is one of the historical tango elements incorporated by Piazzolla into his style, and can be heard in the recordings of a number of tango band leaders, especially Aníbal Troilo and Horacio Salgán.

The *arrastre*, or dragging, essentially means that the strong beat of a measure is prepared in its pitch, attack, volume, or all three parameters, by a preceding note slurred to it. The standard duration of this preparation note would be a half of the beat, and this note may or may not be written.

The parameters prepared in the *arrastre* depend on the particular instrument. In the piano, it is sometimes found in the form of a syncopated anticipation of the beat (Ex. 1):



**Ex. 1 – Horacio Salgán. *Don Agustín Bardi* – beginning. Piano reduction**

The bandoneón is capable of preparing attack and volume, and the violin and double bass can also play with pitch. A good way to describe the *arrastre* is as a transition from indefiniteness to definition, from blurry to focused. Thus, a loud strong beat in the violin may be taken an eighth-note before in “pianissimo,” without attack (starting with the bow closer to the fingerboard, for example) and a half step lower. Then, within the duration of that eighth-note it would rise to the indicated pitch and volume (e.g.: “forte”) and receive an attack, normally with a slap-like movement of the right wrist, which would also shorten the note. Ex. 2 is taken from the my own arrangement of *Invierno Porteño* where the *arrastre* is used (syncopated notes in viola and cello parts):

The musical score for Ex. 2, titled "Invierno Porteño – mm. 69 – 71," illustrates the realization of the *arrastre* effect through orchestration. The score is arranged in a system with seven staves: solo violin, piano, vn. 1, vn. 2, viola, cello, and d. bass. The tempo is marked "poco a poco accel." and the dynamics range from *mf* to *mp*. The solo violin part features a melodic line with a crescendo. The piano part provides harmonic support with chords. The vn. 1 and vn. 2 parts play syncopated notes, with the first violin part marked "pizz." and the second violin part marked "sf". The viola and cello parts also play syncopated notes, with the viola part marked "pizz." and the cello part marked "pizz." and "arco". The d. bass part plays a rhythmic pattern with syncopated notes, marked "pizz." and "arco".

**Ex. 2 – *Invierno Porteño* – mm. 69 – 71. Realization of *arrastre* by means of orchestration.**

In my opinion (also shared by a number of colleagues), the *arrastre* is one of the examples of inter-instrumental borrowing, in this case, from the bandoneón.<sup>69</sup> In this instrument, if one pushes a combination of buttons (normally, one that forms a chord) and starts opening the bellows, soon thereafter stretching them energetically and stopping the movement, then the *arrastre* is the result. The ear perceives the initial hesitant start as a preparation for the chord that sounds at the stretch of the bellows and identifies it as the strong beat of the bar. In the *orquesta típica*, the combined effect of the *arrastre* played by four bandoneons, four violins, a double bass and supported by the piano is one of a breathtaking and wild beauty, as can be appreciated in Aníbal Troilo's recording of *La Bordona*, by Emilio Balcarce.

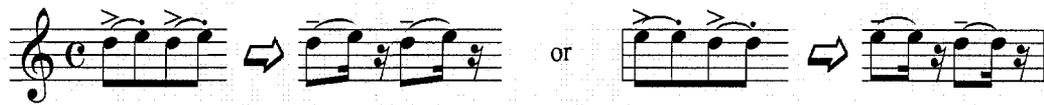
The vertical alignment of the bow's stick and the hair is sometimes also altered from its "academic" lining, by means of a movement that looks as if one were sweeping the strings toward the bridge, adding a sand-like color to the sound. This 'sweeping' may combine on the lower half of the bow with an alteration of the perpendicular alignment between bow and string, starting with a slight inclination of the top of the bow away from the player, and bringing it to the normal perpendicular position, as shown in Fig. 4. This combination results in a particularly heavy version of the *arrastre* for the violin. The first technique, however, is widely used in the double bass in combination with small glissandi of the left hand. This technique will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter.

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<sup>69</sup>In line with my thesis about tango as a three-faceted phenomenon, the instrumental *arrastre* (dragging) may be related to the homonymous figure of the tango dance.

### *Long-short paired notes*

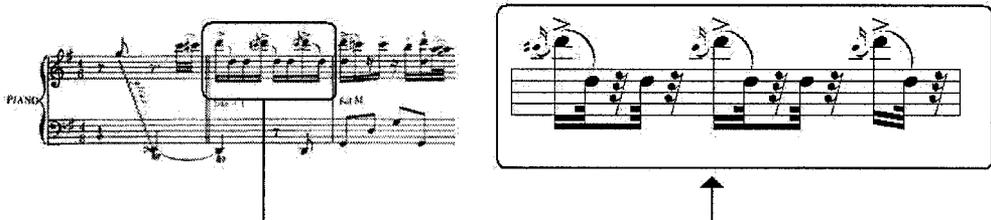
The overall scheme of the *arrastre* has a wider application in a different, very common, context of articulation: the combination of two slurred notes of equal value, usually eighths, where the first note is played in full value and somehow leaned on, and the second is shortened, sometimes in a very cutting way (see Ex. 3).

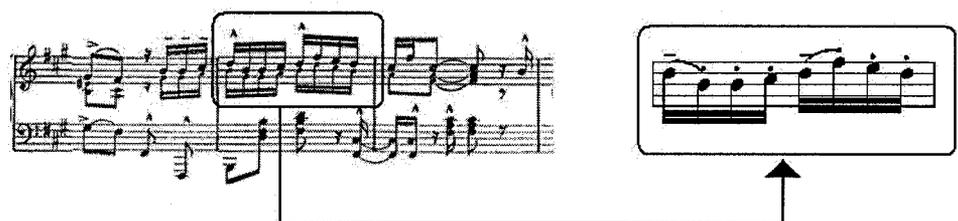


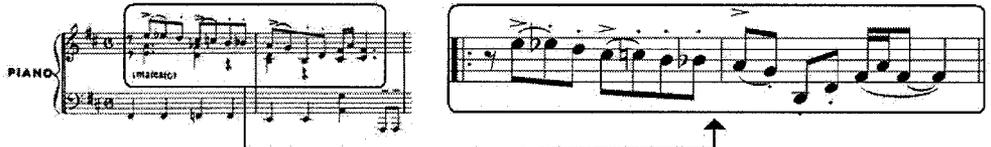
**Ex. 3 – Long-short paired notes**

The first note is attacked normally, then it is slurred, without a break or interruption, to the second note. When this second note is reached, the bow leaves the string, optionally with a slight slap of the wrist, as if yanking out a thread. From a didactical standpoint, this combination could be explained as an “inward-outward” motion. More specifically, on the first note, contact between the bow and the string must be sought and maintained, as if wanting to move “into” the violin. The second note is then played as a result of moving the bow away from the violin. This didactical approach has proven itself successful for teaching this articulation on the piano as well.

Mastery of this kind of articulation is a key element toward mastery of tango articulations. In the first place, since tango scores normally are written for and by tango musicians, this articulation is taken for granted as a feature of style, and, therefore, imperfectly notated. More often, one will find these spellings (Ex. 4):

A. 

B. 

C. 

**Ex. 4 – Paired notes and their realization. A) *Danzarín*, by Julián Plaza. B) *Bahía Blanca*, by Carlos Di Sarli, C) *Decarísimo*, by Astor Piazzolla**

Note that the use of the accent actually means that one must *lean* on that note, as opposed to lightening the bow or lifting it away from the note. In tango scores, the normal accent “>” is often, and regrettably so, used with this meaning.

Modern musical notation offers a wide array of more specific signs to indicate, for example, a “tenuto” note but without an accent, or just the accent or just the sustained note. This is not a problem for tango musicians, but for those who are not familiar with the details of tango articulation, the resulting mass of accents that ends up hovering over the notes of the score as an ominous cloud can be very misleading, unless the arranger, the copyist, or the conductor provides the necessary explanations as to how to interpret this sign.

Another misunderstanding about this notation is that orchestral players sometimes would assume that the dot over the second note of the pair means that it has to be attacked anew, i. e., played as a “staccato” note. In reality, the dot over the second note simply means that it should be shortened, not that it is necessary to break the slur. The only implication that this dot has for the articulation of the second note already has been explained: it means the cutting-off of that note, which is articulated with a light slap of the wrist, not the re-attack of this note.

Taking a closer look at the musical reasons for this “inward-outward” articulation cell, within the logic of tango articulation, it is easy to see that the shortening of the second note of the pair through an active wrist motion is caused, retrospectively, by the fact that it is normally followed either by one or two up-bow notes in a more emphatic articulation, or by a bow retake. A very famous example from Piazzolla’s *Fuga y Misterio* shows both continuations happening in the same semiphrase (Ex. 5):

**Vivo**  $\text{♩} = 140$

The image shows a musical staff in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 6/8. The tempo is marked 'Vivo' with a metronome marking of 140 quarter notes per minute. The music begins with a forte (f) dynamic. The first measure contains a quarter rest followed by a quarter note. The second measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. This pair is circled and labeled 'A'. The third measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. This pair is also circled and labeled 'A'. The fourth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. This pair is circled and labeled 'B'. The fifth measure contains a triplet of eighth notes. The sixth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The seventh measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The eighth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The ninth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The tenth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The eleventh measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The twelfth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The thirteenth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The fourteenth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The fifteenth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The sixteenth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The seventeenth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The eighteenth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The nineteenth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The twentieth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The twenty-first measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The twenty-second measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The twenty-third measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The twenty-fourth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The twenty-fifth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The twenty-sixth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. 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The sixty-third measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The sixty-fourth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The sixty-fifth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The sixty-sixth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The sixty-seventh measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The sixty-eighth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The sixty-ninth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The seventieth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The seventy-first measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. 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The ninetieth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The ninety-first measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The ninety-second measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The ninety-third measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The ninety-fourth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The ninety-fifth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The ninety-sixth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The ninety-seventh measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The ninety-eighth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The ninety-ninth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it. The hundredth measure contains a pair of eighth notes, with the second note having a dot above it.

**Ex. 5 – *Fuga y Misterio* – beginning. A: Two notes up-bow. B: retake.**

The equivalent articulation on the bandoneón is achieved by means of stopping (or slowing down) and then resuming, the opening of the bellows.<sup>70</sup> The type of movement executed by both hands of the bandoneón player is very similar to the one of the right hand of the string player.

As a curiosity and another indication of the need to avoid a literal approach to Piazzolla's music notation, Ex. 6 shows the way he wrote this articulation in the second movement of his *Concerto for bandoneón and orchestra*:



**Ex. 6 – *Concerto for bandoneón and orchestra*. 2<sup>nd</sup> mov., mm. 105 – 106.  
Solo part as published.**

Ex. 7 shows the way Piazzolla clearly performed this passage:



**Ex. 7 – *Concerto for bandoneón and orchestra*. 2<sup>nd</sup> mov., mm. 105 – 106.  
Descriptive notation after author's own performance.**

<sup>70</sup>This articulation is playing almost exclusively in opening motion, i. e. opening the bellows.

### *Tango Articulation and Bowing - Application*

As discussed in the preceding section, the mastery of tango articulation is a necessary step toward rendering an authentic performance of Piazzolla's orchestral works. Proper tango articulation is a key element in developing the "Piazzollean swing," if the interpreter – or, in the case of the orchestra, the conductor – sincerely aims to communicate the "emotional constellation of tango."<sup>71</sup> However, as it was also mentioned, the aesthetical assumptions intrinsic to tango as an art form led to the development of patterns of bowing that, at times, differ and openly contradict the established practice of orchestral bowing. Two particular aspects in which opposing concepts of euphony often conflict are the quality of attack and the use of repeated bow retakes.

A professional situation connected with a fragment of *Adios Nonino* in José Bragato's<sup>72</sup> arrangement for strings would illustrate this point. After a slow introduction, the cellos present a variation of the original *Nonino* theme,<sup>73</sup> later used as a countersubject to the main theme (Ex. 8):

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<sup>71</sup>I am indebted to Mr. Gabriel Castagna for these two serendipitous expressions used by him in a personal e-mail communication about his relationship with tango and the work of Piazzolla.

<sup>72</sup>Violoncellist, conductor and arranger **José Bragato** was born October 12, 1915, in Udine, Italy. He emigrated to Argentina in 1928. In 1946, he became the principal cello of the Buenos Aires Philharmonic Orchestra. He was the cellist of several string quartets, such as the Pessina Quartet, and tango orchestras, such as Francini-Pontier Orchestra. In 1954, he became a member of Astor Piazzolla's *Octeto de Buenos Aires*. Since then, he has been recognized as the leading authority in tango arranging for strings, especially in regard to Piazzolla's music. He introduced Yo-Yo Ma to the music of Astor Piazzolla, and featured in the Grammy-winning compact disc "Soul of Tango." Mr. Bragato is now 92 years old, and it was my privilege and honor to have shared part of the 1997 season with him as a member of the National Orchestra of Argentine Music "Juan de Dios Filiberto," the year of Mr. Bragato's retirement as a cello performer.

<sup>73</sup>Astor Piazzolla composed his famous *Adios Nonino* on the basis of a previous tango, *Nonino*.

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The first staff is labeled 'Lento' and 'p' (piano). It contains measures 43 and 44. The second staff is labeled 'Allegro' and 'f' (forte). It contains measures 45, 46, 47, and 48. Bowing annotations 'v' (downbow) and 'V' (upbow) are present above the notes. A bow retake is indicated by a 'V' above a note in measure 46 of the second staff.

**Ex. 8 – Adios Nonino – m. 43 – 48. Arr. José Bragato.**

Example 8 (above) is taken from the orchestral parts that a professional European chamber orchestra received three years ago (2005) for the performance of this piece. The bowings in the orchestral parts were annotated by a competent Argentine concertmaster, knowledgeable about tango practices. We can see that the bowings are written so that, in bar 43 (fourth beat) and bars 45 and 47 (second beat), a bow retake takes place after an occurrence of long-short paired notes – a characteristic tango articulation unit already discussed. It is possible to analyze this unit in both ways: as the need to retake retrospectively forcing the shortening of the second note of the preceding pair, or as the shortening of the note enabling the retake. Either way, the annotated bowing produces the expected musical result.

During the first rehearsal of the program, the principal cello suggested the following change in the bowings (Ex. 9):

The image shows two staves of musical notation in bass clef. The first staff, starting at measure 43, is marked 'Lento' and 'p'. It contains a melodic line with a dynamic shift to 'f' (forte) at measure 44. The second staff, starting at measure 46, is marked 'Allegro' and 'f'. It features a more rhythmic, eighth-note pattern. Both staves include bowing instructions: 'v' for down-bow and '>' for up-bow.

**Ex. 9 – Adios Nonino – m. 43 – 48. Arr. José Bragato.  
Alternative “classical” bowing**

His honest argument was that the retakes conspired against the fluidity and beauty of the melodic line. Indeed, from a “classical” point of view, his bowings keep the normal alternation of up- and down-bows and avoid any roughness of attack or abrupt cut in the articulation. But it is *because* of this that these bowings are ill-suited for this passage, style and piece. Beside the fact that the retakes (in the tango bowing of the piece, Ex. 8) are paired with long-short units, forming in fact a meta-unit, they also happen right before a rhythmic contraction,<sup>74</sup> which needs be emphasized, not softened. These contractions should be the focus of the rhythmic energy and articulation, and therefore not only the down-bow is better for them, but also the attack should have a particularly sharp and edgy quality. Thus, the use of a section of the bow closer to the frog is preferable. Since this type of articulation was alien to the principal cello of the orchestra (who otherwise happened to be an extraordinary professional) he felt the need to “correct” the bowings that he assumed were “wrong.” The enlightening intervention of the conductor and his explanations

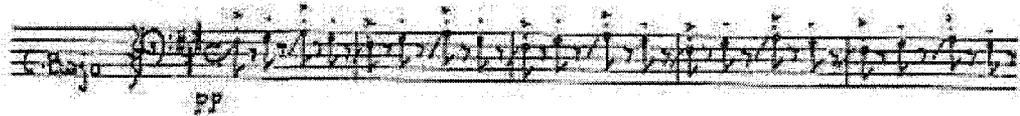
<sup>74</sup>See the section in this document about *rubato* in Piazzolla’s performance.

convinced him to go back to the tango-style bowings, which the cello section then performed masterfully, as I had the opportunity to witness.

The situation related above is a model of the type of misunderstandings that the music director and conductor faces when working with repertoire and musicians that cross cultural boundaries. In the case of tango, it is always advisable, if a conductor plans on regularly including Piazzolla's (or another tango composer's) orchestral works in his repertoire, to have the score bowed by a tango expert. It is important that the expert in charge be able to explain the reasons behind his bowing decisions and, optimally, to show to the conductor the different outcome of different bowing options on a stringed instrument (or have it demonstrated by a competent performer). This is important for educational purposes, but it is also highly probable that the orchestral conductor will receive proposals for "improving" or "correcting" these bowings from the principals of the orchestra under his baton. The conductor needs to be able to offer experienced orchestral professional and section leaders sound reasons to stick to unpopular, unusual bowings. On the basis of whatever direct information from authentic sources and tango experts the conductor may gather, in time – if the tango repertoire becomes a part of his regular performances – he or she would develop a working description of the tango articulation, one that would be appropriate and useful in rehearsal time in order to shorten and smooth the path toward its realization by the orchestral ensemble.

### Note Preparation and *Cromático* Pick-ups

In a previous section, the *arrastre* was described as a way of preparing different acoustical parameters of a strong beat. The same principle applies in varying degrees for strong beats in general. As was indicated by Ramón Pelinski, “The attack of structurally important notes with a *glissando* (or a short *appoggiatura*) is [...] a typical practice both for traditional and New tango.”<sup>75</sup> Here are the initial measures of the double bass part of *Buenos Aires Hora Cero*, in its original arrangement for Piazzolla’s quintet:



#### Ex. 10 – *Buenos Aires Hora Cero* – mm. 1 – 5

Note the diagonal lines before beats one and three, which in turn are marked with an accent. This sign is a standard notation for a light form of *arrastre*, not so much based on volume as on pitch. The technique implies placing the finger slightly lower in pitch and starting the note ahead of time, and then using this anticipation to slide up to the right pitch. A light increase of bow speed cuts the note off. An important feature of this articulation is that the *arrastre* and accentuation of the strong beats must be coupled with a deliberate deemphasis<sup>76</sup> of the weak beats. Sometimes a less explicit notation of the

<sup>75</sup>“L’attaque des notes structurellement importantes par un *glissando* (ou d’une brève *appoggiatura*) est [...] une pratique typique autant du tango traditionnel que du *Nuevo*.” Ramón Pelinski (2003), op. cit. p. 46.

<sup>76</sup>This term is used in the sense that historically informed Baroque performers give to it.

analyzed articulation is found, although one can with certainty affirm that the manner of performance is the same. See this example from *Tangazo*:



**Ex. 11 – *Tangazo* – double bass, mm. 274 – 276**

The shortness of the notes is here implied – no dot or rhythmic value signals it.

In the previous examples, the articulation unit is composed by one strong beat with *arrastre* and one deemphasized weak beat, producing a jazz-like walking bass. This preparation of the strong beat, however, extends sometimes over more than a half-tone span and, therefore, is difficult to assimilate to the *arrastre*. See the following example, taken from the coda of *Invierno Porteño*:



**Ex. 12 – *Invierno Porteño*, Coda**

Note that the *arrastre* here turns into a two-sixteenth-note chromatic pick-up.

Tango contrabassist play this type of pick-up slightly blurred in that they tend to play one pair of notes with different fingers and the other pair with the same finger, thus combining fingering and glissando.

An even more common chromatic preparation of the strong beat, at the start of a musical phrase, is the four-note pick-up:

**Ex. 13 – *Melancólico Buenos Aires* – beginning**

(See also the pick-up before the change of key in Ex. 12). The pick-up notes are no longer mere pitch slides (as in Ex. 10 and 11), but they are not harmonically significant either. An example of harmonically significant pick-up notes tied to their ensuing strong beats by means of glissando is found in the *Double Concerto for Bandoneón, Guitar and String Orchestra*:

**Ex. 14 – *Double Concerto for bandoneón, guitar and string orchestra* – Third Movement – mm. 97 – 100. Double bass part. © Editions Henry Lemoine, Paris 1985**

The tempo of this movement (quarter-note = 112) prevents the double bass player from fingering, even partially, this glissando. In slower tempi though, the note pair formed by the harmonically significant pick-up plus the strong beat

would break down into the collection of half-steps that fill out their interval.<sup>77</sup> For instruments like the piano and bandoneón this is the only possible way to approximate a glissando anyway. This type of pick-up is known generically among tango musicians as *cromático* (“chromatic [pick-up],”) and is one of the prominent stylistic features of modern tango. For example:

(Andante Tranquilo, ♩ = 72)

Pno.

(bass line in unison with the doble bass)

**Ex. 15 – *Revirado* – arr. for solo violin, strings and piano by A. Drago  
mm. 24 – 27.**

When the double bass executes this pick-up in a medium to slow tempo, glissando and fingering usually are combined.

Note that it is difficult to draw a line between the *cromático* that connects harmonically relevant notes in the manner of a diminution, and the quadruple chromatic pick-up, as shown in Ex. 13. Of course, the quadruple chromatic pick-up starts usually a major third below the note, regardless of whether this starting note is harmonically connected to the strong beat. In a real performance situation, the combination of fingered and glissando playing, plus the fact that the starting note is not always clearly audible (due to register and softness), tend to blur the difference. However, whenever Piazzolla actually intended to fill the gap between a dominant note and a tonic note in a harmonic cadence, then he would

<sup>77</sup>In other words, it would turn into a chromatic scalar diminution. See section on Ornamentation and Rubato.

spell out the diminution and write either a quintuplet, another rhythmic combination of five notes – usually an eighth and four sixteenths – or use four notes, two of which are separated not by a half-tone, but by a whole-tone interval, in order to start and finish in the desired notes, and not merely give the strong beat a chromatic jump:

|     |  |
|-----|--|
| A.  |  |
| B.  |  |
| C1. |  |
| C2. |  |

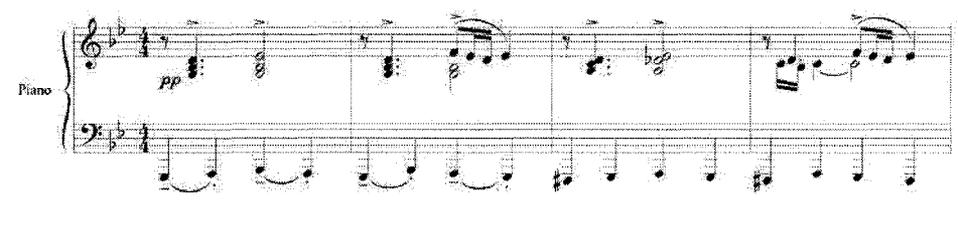
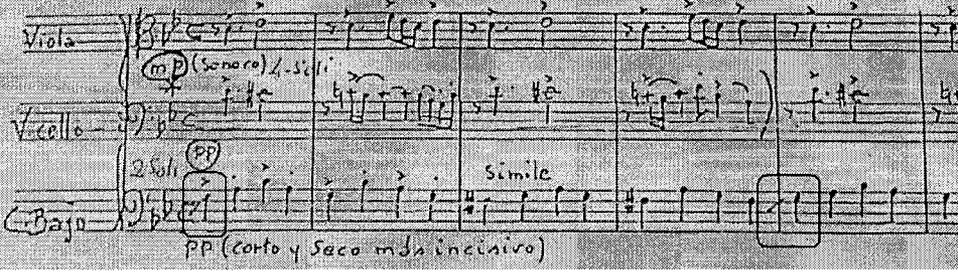
Ex. 16 – A) *Invierno Porteño*, mm. 96 – 98 (version for piano trio by J. Bragato.) B) *Revirado* – beginning. C1) *Melancólico Buenos Aires*, mm. 41 – 42. C2) *ibid.* mm. 34 – 35.

The main consequence of this differentiation for performance is that, in the harmonically functioning *cromáticos* (diminutions between cadential steps), both the initial and final notes of the figure should be played clearly in order to bring out its harmonic content, whereas the non-functional *cromáticos* tend to (1) start one dynamic step lower, (2) are very slightly slower in tempo, (3) have a certain laziness about them, and (4) gain momentum and shape as the music moves on. In this regard, they represent a middle step between *arrastre* and the filling-in of the interval between the dominant and the tonic notes (in a cadential phrase ending or phrase start) with a scalar chromatic diminution. Occurrences of these elements in the orchestral setting will be discussed in the following section.

#### *Cromático – Orchestral Examples*

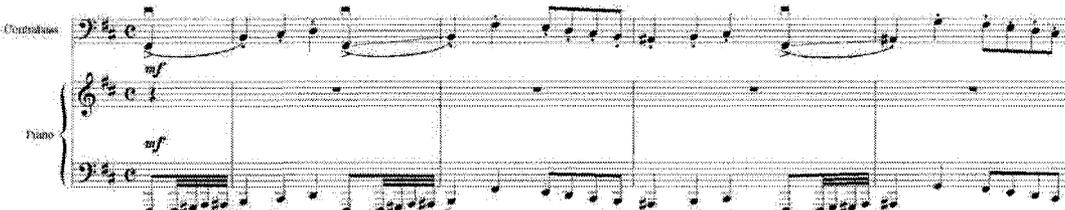
##### *1) Verano Porteño – beginning.*

To appreciate to which extent the *cromático* pick-ups and diminutions are an idiomatic element of Piazzolla's music, Ex. 17A and 17B represent the bass line of *Verano Porteño* as written (and as it appears in almost every edition and arrangement of this piece) and Ex. 18 shows how it was actually played by Piazzolla's ensemble under his direction:

|    |                                                                                    |
|----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A. |  |
| B. |  |

**Ex. 17 – Verano Porteño – mm. 1–4. Arr. by José Bragato**  
**A: for piano trio. B: for string orchestra**

In the first fragment, no attempt was made to include the *cromático* pick-up. The second arrangement (Ex. 17B) shows an increased awareness of this element, which is marked in bars 1 and 5 with the *arrastre* sign. In descriptive notation, here is how Piazzolla's quintet played it:



**Ex. 18 – Verano porteño – mm. 1 – 4. Piazzolla's performance**

2) *Concerto for bandoneón and orchestra*. I mov., mm. 114 – 115.

The image shows a musical score for five staves. The top four staves are in treble clef, and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The music features a pick-up note followed by a quintuplet of notes, with accents and slurs indicating phrasing. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 3/4. The quintuplet consists of five notes: B4, C5, D5, E5, and F#5. The notes are beamed together and have a '5' above them. The pick-up note is a quarter note B4. The notes are followed by a half note G5 and a quarter note A5. The bottom staff has a similar rhythmic pattern with a pick-up note and a quintuplet of notes.

Ex. 19 – *Concerto for bandoneón and orchestra*, 1<sup>st</sup> mov., mm. 114 -115

During the nine bars that precede this pick-up, a number of four-note *cromático* pick-ups are found. Interestingly, when this cadence (e minor,  $V_7 - (VI_6) - i$ ) is reached, a quintuplet is used in order to match the notes of the cello with the bass of the harmony (b – e), against the four sixteenths in the violin and viola sections, instead of starting a similar figure with a b#. Here we can see the difference between *cromático* pick-up and the scalar filling-in of a harmonically significant interval. Since the starting note of the pick-up in violins and violas happens to coincide with the notes of the dominant chord ( $B_7$ ) without rhythmic alteration, these starting notes have been underscored with an accent over them.

Finally, here there are two more contrasting examples of cromático pick-ups from the *Concerto for bandoneón and orchestra*:

The image displays two musical excerpts, A and B, from the *Concerto for bandoneón and orchestra*.  
**Excerpt A:** Shows the first movement, measure 132. It features five staves: Vn 1, Vn 2, Vle, Celli, and Cbassi. The top four staves are grouped together. The Cbassi staff has a pick-up note marked with a '5' and a '6' below it, indicating a chromatic pick-up. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C).  
**Excerpt B:** Shows the second movement, measure 44. It features two staves: Solo Cello and Bando. The Solo Cello staff has a pick-up note marked with a '43' and a '(b)' below it, indicating a chromatic pick-up. The Bando staff has a pick-up note marked with a '43' and a '2' below it, indicating a chromatic pick-up. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C).

Ex. 20 – *Concerto for bandoneón and orchestra*.  
 A) 1<sup>st</sup> mov., m. 132. B) 2<sup>nd</sup> mov., m. 44

### Rhythm, Meter and Time Signature in Piazzolla

#### 1. Metric transformations

**Polymeter**, or the use of two metric frameworks simultaneously or in regular alternation, is a prominent characteristic of Piazzolla's style.<sup>78</sup> Here is a typical example:

<sup>78</sup>For the purposes of this dissertation, the numbers between [square brackets] designate a meter that is not necessarily reflected by the time signature. Otherwise, the normal time signature is used. Polymeters will be annotated this way: [332]~4/4. Where the polymeter extends over the barline, it is annotated in this way: [332]~2x{4/4}.

Ex. 21

Sometimes, asymmetrical compound meters extend over the barline, which is typically the case of the [333322] structure:

Ex. 22

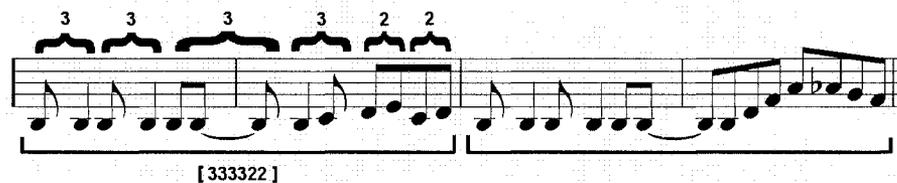
From a musical standpoint, the lack of coincidence (in the second bar) between the accents of the [333322]-meter and the main accent of the 4/4 bar creates what might be called a “rhythmic expectation” that the two final beats (of the second bar) resolve.

Note that the coincidence points between these meters, as shown in the previous example, create a rhythmically duplicated (expanded) [332]-hypermeter:

Ex. 23

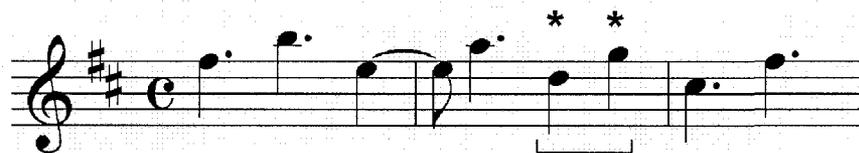
Furthermore, each of the [3]-cells of the [332] hypermeter can be heard in two different ways: as a compound duple meter (6/8 in the example), or as a simple triple meter (3/4). Interestingly, the metric ambiguity is a fundamental stylistic element of many Argentine folk dances, particularly, the *malambo*.

Piazzolla very often would play on the rhythmic ambiguity of the repeated [3]-cell in [332] and [333322] meters. He would change the time signature (and the meter) from a duple simple time signature (for ex.: 4/4, although the real meter is [333322]) to a time signature equivalent to the [3]-cell (that is, a simple triple meter or a compound meter formed by repeated [3]-cells – in our case, 3/8 or 6/8) and maintain it for a while before returning to the original compound meter. Instances of this kind of ambiguity are numerous. For example, in *Escualo* after sixteen cycles of the [33332]-meter,



**Ex. 24 – *Escualo* – main subject**

a section in 6/8 starts. The listener, unaware of this change of time signature, would only notice it on the third bar of the new signature. The listener's musical expectation, up to the obvious meter change, would be the continuation of the [33332]-meter in the following way (asterisks indicate durations altered for the purpose of exemplification):



Ex. 25

However, that is not what happens. Under the new time signature (6/8), all chords last for a dotted quarter:

Ex. 26 – *Escualo* – mm. 35 – 41

The asymmetry of the [333322] meter is thus broken and substituted by a succession of equal duration chords. After having heard sixteen complete runs of the [333322] metric structure, this repetition of equal duration chords in 6/8 creates a sort of suspension of the metric sense. It has the musical effect of intensifying and prolonging the “rhythmic expectation” for a return to a meter that would provide rhythmic resolution of the expectation on a cyclical basis, like a simple 4/4 meter, or the previous [333322]-meter, which reinitiates every two measures. This meter indeed comes back after eight bars in 6/8, as shown at the end of the previous example.

Another important example of this meter change is found in *Primavera*

*Porteña*:

The musical score for Ex. 27 - *Primavera Porteña*, m. 40, is arranged for violin and chamber orchestra. The score is in G major and 3/8 time. The violin part begins with a circled measure number '40'. The first six measures of the violin part feature a series of triplets (3) over the notes. The chamber orchestra part has two measures with a [332] bracket over the notes, indicating a polymeter of 3/8-[332]. The score includes a violin part and a chamber orchestra part.

**Ex. 27 - *Primavera Porteña*, m. 40**  
 arrangement for violin and chamber orchestra by A. Drago  
 corresponding to 1'09'' of the Regina Theater recording by Piazzolla and  
 his Quintet

(the time signature wasn't changed due to the need to accommodate the  
 polymeter 3/8-[332]). Compare:

The image shows a musical score for five staves. The first staff is labeled 'On the E & A strings' and the second 'On the D & G strings'. The third staff is for piano, the fourth for bass, and the fifth for another bass part. The score includes dynamic markings such as 'crescendo', 'ritardando', and 'crescendo', and a 'cantata' marking. The time signature changes from 2/4 to 3/8 and back to 2/4.

**Ex. 28 - Primavera Porteña, m. 113**  
**arrangement for violin and chamber orchestra by A. Drago**  
**corresponding to 3'58" of the Regina Theater recording by Piazzolla and**  
**his Quintet**

The difference in the transition in the two examples, to and from the new meter, reflects Piazzolla's own quintet's interpretation. This metric transition was eliminated (!) in the Lagos edition for bandoneón and piano, while in the guitar version by Sergio Assad, the rhythms of the two sections are annotated identically. In the piano trio version by J. Bragato, the one-eighth difference between the two sections is also ignored, but in the second section the time signature reflects the metric change – seven 3/8 bars and one 2/4.

This type of metric transition is already found in Piazzolla's early, pre-Parisian works. In the *Sinfonietta*, third movement, we find the [332] structure superimposed to two 2/4 bars (so it would be [332]~2x{2/4}) in the following manner:

Ex. 29 – *Sinfonietta*, 3<sup>rd</sup> mov., mm. 94 – 98.

The [332]-meter reappears in numerous sections of this movement (mm. 123 – 126, 131 – 134, 138 – 144, between 141 and 144), superimposed to a bass line in quarter-notes, moving stepwise or to close steps, a resource that Piazzolla later would use abundantly (see mm. 147 – 157, and m. 187), including a curious mirror inversion [233] in measure 135. In many of the above mentioned sections, the predominant melodic figure is a motive assigned to the piano:

Ex. 30 – *Sinfonietta*, 3<sup>rd</sup> mov., piano motive, mm. 131 - 132

Although the meter is clearly 6/8, starting from bar 191, Piazzolla changes the time signature to 3/4, since these bars (191 – 194) just extend the [3]-cell of the preceding [332]-meter, as was discussed in Ex. 26. The resulting effect of deconstruction or decontextualization of the [332] meter is prepared in the previous bars by means of horizontal rhythmic displacements of fragments of the piano motive of Ex. 30.

In this movement Piazzolla repeats this procedure, transforming the [332] structure of rehearsal number 17 (mm. 210 – 211):

Ex. 31 – *Sinfonietta*, 3<sup>rd</sup> mov., mm. 210 – 211.

into a compound duple meter (6/8) spelled as a 3/4 measure (m. 231):

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Harp (Hrf.), Piano (Klav.), and Strings. The Harp part is marked with a circled asterisk (\*) and a dynamic marking of *sf*. The Piano part is also marked with a dynamic marking of *sf*. The Strings part features a triplet of eighth notes and a *pizz.* marking. The score is in 3/4 time and consists of two measures.

**Ex. 32 – *Sinfonietta*, Third mov., m. 231. Metric transformation**

Note that, were it not for the rhythmic support of the harp (see (\*) in the example), a possible alternative hearing would be 12/16.

In a freer, less systematic way, but certainly in an anticipation of the extended use that Piazzolla would make of it, a metric transition is found in another pre-Parisian work: *Contemplación y Danza* op. 15 (1951) for clarinet and string orchestra (see Ex. 33)

Interestingly, the aggregate of bars 46 to 50 results in a [333322] structure. If the listener has created a rhythmic expectation of this meter, then the entrance of the 2/4 bar in bar 54 would be perceived as a surprise, as a rhythmic break.

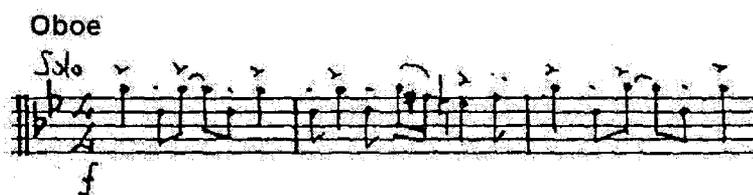
16

bar 45

bar 50

Ex. 33 - *Contemplación y Danza* – mm. 45 – 55

In *Tangazo*, the subject of the fugato that starts section B (Allegro, bar 68) is a typical example of the [333322] meter:



Ex. 34 – *Tangazo* – m. 68. Fugal subject.

When this theme is reexposed, in the following Allegro section (bar 211) leading to the coda, Piazzolla briefly uses the first bar of the theme in a deceptive way as a part of a harmonic sequence – he treats this cell as a [332] meter:

Musical notation showing a complex rhythmic sequence in 4/4 time. The notation is on a single staff, showing a series of notes and rests. Two measures are highlighted by boxes to illustrate the [332] meter.

Ex. 35 – *Tangazo* – m. 211

This kind of breakdown of complex rhythmic formulas into lesser elements, sometimes treated minimalistically, is also found in many places in Piazzolla's work (ex.: *Michelangelo 70*, *Milonga Loca*) and used to create a sense of dramatic summation toward the end of the piece.

## 2. A note on the [332] meter in tango

In addressing Piazzolla's treatment of rhythm, it seemed to me necessary to introduce a paragraph on the history of the [332] meter in tango. The ubiquity of this rhythmic formula in Piazzolla's work made it a seal of his rhythmic style, and most audiences naturally assumed that he was its creator. This would only

be a detail, an irrelevant factual inaccuracy, if Piazzolla himself had not come to believe it as well. Piazzolla was prone to grandiloquent generalizations in his public statements, possibly due to his extremely energetic personality, but probably also because of the continuous and dishonest attacks he suffered during most of his career. Nevertheless, the fact that Piazzolla actually did not create or introduce this meter in tango only speaks once more to his unbreakable connection to the mainstream traditional tango. This is something only now, with the due perspective of time and distance from his controversial personality, that we are in a position to clearly see and appreciate.

In Pelinski's words:

The use of the rhythmic formula 332 in the traditional tangos didn't allow to foresee the structural importance that it would gain with our composer [Piazzolla]. Its origins go back to the 3-1-2-2 formula,<sup>79</sup> so characteristic of the Andalusian tango and the Habanera in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and left traces in vocal and instrumental milongas (for example, *Milonga del Angel*) composed by Piazzolla. [...] In spite of Piazzolla's statement that it was he who introduced the 3-3-2 formula into tango, it is found sporadically since the mid-20s, for example in Julio de Caro's *Sexteto Típico* (1926 – 1928). Piazzolla, however, has spread its utilization, which he borrowed not only from traditional tango, but also from the Klezmer music that he heard in the years of his adolescence in New York.<sup>80</sup>

García Brunelli completes the concept:

As for the famous "332," Piazzolla says: "*Tango has four beats. [...] I used three, which is a figure that I introduced into those four fourths; I used three beats embedded into those four. I was the one to start this, which now is often used.*" In reality, Piazzolla didn't start this practice but systematized it; he made it a trait of his style. This type of accentuation lies in the very essence of tango, more exactly, in the milonga component of tango.

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<sup>79</sup>As it is clear from the context within the article, Pelinski means here the combination "dotted quarter-note – eighth-note – quarter-note – quarter-note" (note by A. Drago).

<sup>80</sup> Ramón Pelinski (2003), op. cit. p. 44.

Moreover, this resource was used sporadically by Troilo's orchestra during the time that Piazzolla was a member of it. It appears, among other tangos, in *Mano Brava* (1941), *El Tamango* (1941) and *La Tablada* (1942.) If we go back in time, we'll find it, for example, in the introduction to the tango *El Triunfo* by Canaro's orchestra (1929), in the piano accompaniment of *Buena Mano* by C.V.G. Flores' orchestra (c. 1923), very often in De Caro's orchestra, and it can be heard in the only existing recording of Vardaro's sextet, *Tigre Viejo* (c. 1937). It is evidently a form of 'rhythmic output' that was in the air, used by almost everybody, but transformed by Piazzolla in a trademark of his style.<sup>81</sup>

### Yumba<sup>82</sup>

According to Gabriela Mauriño, "the main influence [by Osvaldo Pugliese] on Piazzolla's music is the *yumba*,<sup>83</sup> an onomatopoeia that designates the idiosyncratic way of rhythmic accompaniment characteristic to the tango orchestra that Pugliese conducted."<sup>84</sup> Several definitions of this type of rhythmic pattern have been attempted. In my opinion, the most economic is this: The *yumba* happens when, in a four-beat bar, the second and fourth beats (the even beats of the bar) have the following characteristics:

1. The pitch is undetermined, either because of the use of a cluster on the lower register of the piano, or because the corresponding note is

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<sup>81</sup>Omar García Brunelli, op. cit., pp. 171–172.

<sup>82</sup>It is debatable whether *yumba* should be considered a rhythmic figure, a performance practice, or a particular instrumental texture. Due to its relevance in rhythmic matters, it will be treated in this document as a rhythmic feature, without losing sight of its other characteristics.

<sup>83</sup>In Argentina, the "y" in "yumba" is pronounced as the "s" in *pleasure* (IPA: 3um-ba:).

<sup>84</sup>Gabriela Mauriño, "Raíces Tangueras de la Obra de Astor Piazzolla," *Latin American Music Review/Revista de Música Latinoamericana* 22, no. 2 (Fall-Winter 2001): 240–254.

substituted by a percussive idiomatic effect, different for different instruments.

2. These even beats sound, if not louder, at least with more articulation and attack than the odd beats,
3. These even beats are prepared, or followed by, some sort of glissando, slide, cue-note or extreme contrast of register.

As with most rhythmically supporting musical schemes in tango, *yumba* is typically associated with the piano and the double bass, though nothing prevents other instruments in the tango ensemble from taking part.

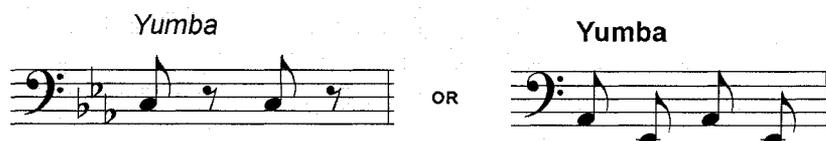
It is plausible conjecture to think of the *yumba* as an extreme variant of the typical tango rhythmic beating that alternates strong odd beats with less strong but more articulated and shorter, even beats, as seen in the first of Piazzolla's *Tres Tangos para Bandoneón y Orquesta*, mm. 119 and subs.:

**Pesante**

The musical score is titled "Pesante" and is in 2/4 time. It consists of five staves. The top staff is for the bandoneón, marked "div. arco". The second staff is for the piano, marked "div. p arco". The third staff is for the double bass, marked "div. p arco". The fourth staff is for the violin, marked "p arco". The fifth staff is for the double bass, marked "p arco" and "pizz.". The music features a rhythmic pattern of alternating strong odd beats and shorter even beats.

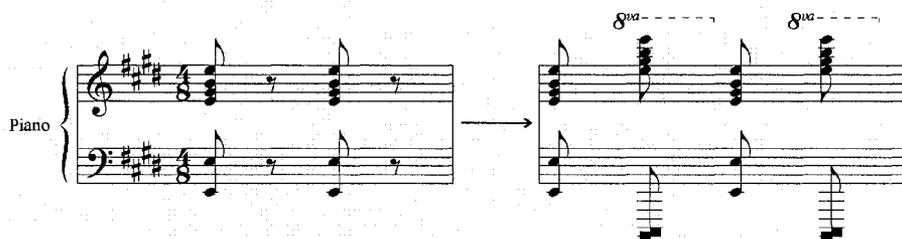
**Ex. 36 – Tres Tangos para Bandoneón y Orquesta – no. 1 – mm. 119 – 122**

In tango scores in general,<sup>85</sup> whenever it is expected that the *yumba*-type beating be performed, it is usually indicated by means of annotating the notes on the odd beats (first and third) and adding the word “yumba:”



Ex. 37

The lack of pitch definition of the even beats of the *yumba*, in the case of the piano, is reinforced by the fact that the left hand plays these beats in the extreme low register of the instrument. Pugliese would regularly underscore this effect by transposing the chord of the right hand one or two octaves higher. In this way, he created a momentary void in the middle register, well known to orchestrational theory for its particularly dramatic effect. See Ex. 38:



Ex. 38

It is worth mentioning that, as the [332] meter became a trademark of Piazzolla’s style and, nowadays, its utilization implies almost an allusion to the master’s work, so the *yumba* rhythmic accompaniment was a distinctive feature of Pugliese’s orchestra. Within the community of tango musicians, connoisseurs

<sup>85</sup>Meaning scores written for tango musicians, i.e. musicians that have a cultural membership in the tango musical tradition.

and general tangophile audiences, its use by Piazzolla should have been perceived as an allusion, a borrowing or a homage to Pugliese.

Undoubtedly, this rhythmic structure is found in many of the compositions that Piazzolla wrote for his different ensembles. It would be enough to mention *Contrabajisimo* (1986) – see *The Central Park Concert* live recording (track 09, 1' 42"), after the introductory solo by the double bass – where four bars of *yumba* accompaniment serve as a bridge to the main theme.

#### *Yumba in Piazzolla's Orchestral Music*

No less numerous are the occurrences of *yumba* structures in Piazzolla's orchestral music. For obvious reasons, in the case of orchestral music the annotation of the *yumba* effect has to be more detailed and complete, and also scattered between different orchestral sections, thus making its link to the Piazzollean and Pugliesian *yumba* less evident. Here is an example:

The image shows a musical score for Ex. 39, consisting of two systems. The first system includes three percussion parts: Timpani, Guiro, and Gr. cassa. The second system includes five string parts: Violins (Vn.), Violas (Vla.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabass (Cb.). The score is marked with dynamics like *p* and *ppp*, and includes performance instructions like "Tamburo", "div. pizz.", "arco", and "sim.". A circled number 167 is visible on the left side of the score.

**Ex. 39 – *Tres Tangos para Bandoneón y Orquesta* – no. 1 – m. 167**

This orchestral texture is worth some analysis in terms of the three criteria outlined above for the definition of *yumba*. Note the Cm6/9 chord in the cello (a “dirty” Cm chord that stresses the odd beats by means of its dissonance), the indication “tamburo” for violins and violas (the “drum” effect, a percussive effect discussed in a separate section), and the combination of the glissando of the double basses with the roll of the timpani. Also note the contrast between the pitched first and third beats, and the undetermined-pitched and open-registered (see the guiro “swish” plus the Gran Cassa beat) second and fourth beats. This is clearly a *yumba* texture constructed by means of symphonic orchestration.

Here are more examples of *yumba* in Piazzolla’s orchestral works:

267 Mas lento y muy acanyegando

Piano

Vn 1

Vn 2

Viola

Celli

DBass

Ex. 40. *Tangazo* – m. 267

Piano

Harp

Timp.

guiro

Dbass

PIANO

ARPA

TIMP.

PERC.

C. BAJO

A

B

Ex. 41 – *Concerto for bandoneón and orchestra, Third mov.*  
A) m. 161. B) m. 178

The enigmatic indication “más lento y muy acanyengado” in Ex. 40 (misspelled on the score as *acanyegando*) gives us the opportunity to briefly touch one of the most interesting aspects of tango history: the influence of Black culture on the creation and development of tango. While this topic is not within the scope of this dissertation, some aspects of it are relevant to the understanding of Piazzolla’s music. According to the Argentinean historian Néstor Ortiz Oderigo,<sup>86</sup> a specialist in Afro-South American studies, the word “canyengue,” a phonetic variant of “cayengue,” comes from the Kimbundu word *ka-llengue* (IPA: *ka-ljenge*) – the name of a dance practiced on both shores of the Río de la Plata by the African population in their Candombes.<sup>87</sup> The term “cayengue” was assigned to the Candombe walking step: the dragging of the foot accompanied by the swagger of the shoulders performed with cadence. This term reappeared in tango music in Buenos Aires about 1910, when the production of piano scores for tango music reached its zenith. This time the word *cayengue* or *canyengue* was used to describe a way to play tango musical instruments with drumming rhythms. In dance, to ‘dance *canyengue*’ was equivalent to ‘dance like the blacks.’ By association and phonetic similarity with *calle*, *callejero* (street, streetwise) the word came to be understood as walking with a marked rhythm, bending the knees.

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<sup>86</sup>Néstor R. Ortiz Oderigo, *Calunga; croquis del candombe* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1969), 60 and subs. For additional reference, see C. Aharonian, ‘Candombe,’ *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy, <<http://www.grovemusic.com>> (accessed March 4, 2008)

<sup>87</sup>*Candombe*: during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, among Afro-Argentines and Afro-Uruguayans, a collective term for spiritual and religious practices accompanied by dance and music. Nowadays, the name of a dance.

The topic of the African influence on tango is one that reappears periodically. In the cases of Piazzolla and another illustrious tango musician, Horacio Salgán (himself a descendant of Afro-Argentines), the extensive incorporation of percussive and syncopated sections into their compositions and arrangements brought renewed attention toward African elements in tango music. This renewed interest may have been the indirect result of these musicians' connection with another music of African roots, jazz. In the example above, the appeal to the *canyengue* style, in the form of the neologism *acanyengado* (which could be freely translated as "with canyengue-like flavor") is meant to imply an extremely rhythmic, cadential section, with an almost corporal, ecstatic sense of movement. It is no coincidence that *canyengue* sections in a *yumba* texture end apothetically both *Tangazo* and the *Concerto for bandoneón and orchestra*, as shown in Examples 40, 41A, and 41B.

### Ornamentation And Rubato

This chapter will attempt to analyze Piazzolla's melodic variation and ornamentation procedures, not only as applied by him in his performances (i.e.: as a bandoneón player of his own compositions) and by musicians of chamber ensembles under his musical direction, but also as these are reflected in his published works, and whenever these performance practices may have determined the basic structure of the melody or other elements in his compositions. This analysis will only cover the more prominent features, since a thorough, exhaustive analysis of Piazzolla's performance style would rather fall

within the field of ethnomusicology, requiring the application of the acoustical, theoretical and statistical tools characteristic of that discipline. The main task will be to point out elements of Piazzolla's performance style that are important to the understanding and proper reading of his scores, and to offer a basic level of analysis and context to these elements. Examples of extrapolation and application of these procedures will be given.

After careful consideration, I have found that the conceptual model of the Italian Baroque composer is an excellent way to approach this analysis. The 'Baroque' character of Piazzolla's compositions has been pointed out many times. This observation is often based on Piazzolla's frequent use of imitative counterpoint and the number of his compositions that contain fugatos or fugue expositions.<sup>88</sup> Although this ubiquity of imitative counterpoint can certainly be seen as a statement of allegiance to a certain neo-classical style, the proposed goal is not just to present samples of Baroque-like musical elements in Piazzolla's work, but to relate Piazzolla to a Baroque 'model of musicianship'.<sup>89</sup> My line of thought would be better expressed by this commentary:

How did the organ concertos by G. F. Handel sound when the master himself sat at the organ to entertain his audiences during the intermissions of his large-scale oratorios with his astonishing improvisations to an orchestral accompaniment? What did it sound

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<sup>88</sup>I can only echo Ramón Pelinski's observation (2003, op. cit.) regarding the much-praised Piazzolla's "fugues." In reality, Piazzolla never wrote a complete fugue, with the exception of "Fears," the No. 5 from *Five Tango Sensations* for bandoneón and string quartet. What many aficionados call fugues in Piazzolla are, in fact, fugatos or fugue expositions.

<sup>89</sup>By 'model of musicianship' I understand, in a very wide sense, the constellation of interrelated musical activities by an artist. In the case of Piazzolla, it is his varied activity as a composer, his performances, his activity as arranger (of himself and others,) music director, impresario and public advocate for artistic renewal, and his particular way of combining, approaching and developing each of these lines of work.

like when François Couperin sketched his harpsichord portraits in the presence of illustrious circles of aristocrats? Above all, however, how binding was the written musical text for the performers? Did they allow themselves spontaneous alterations beyond the various and variously documented ornaments, and thereby really lend every new performance a new face?<sup>90</sup>

Among the elements of Piazzolla's model of musicianship that relate to the figure of the Baroque composer-performer, we may cite the amount of music he composed,<sup>91</sup> the multiplicity of purpose of his music,<sup>92</sup> and the number of arrangements other performers made of his works – a number impossible to trace. More importantly, there are three more characteristics that establish this relation in a particularly patent way. One characteristic that Piazzolla shared with most jazz musicians and some modern classical musicians (such as Hindemith, Bartók and Prokofiev) was that he was a regular performer of his own compositions. In a more Baroque way, he was primarily a performer of his own compositions. The second characteristic is the lack of distinction in his work between “serious” and “popular” music. The spectrum of venues in which Piazzolla performed ranged from cabarets, nightclubs and jazz clubs to the most sophisticated concert halls in the greatest capital cities of Europe and the United States, performing essentially the same kind of music in all these venues. The same may be said about the musicians with whom he collaborated, including

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<sup>90</sup>E.H., “Astor Piazzolla - A Composer of Baroque Stature” in accompanying booklet, *Astor Piazzolla en suite* performed by Astor Piazzolla and his Quintet. Trova Industrias Musicales S. A. CD 5059, © 2003, compact disc. Reproduced with the publisher's permission.

<sup>91</sup>Sources disagree on the exact number of Piazzolla's compositions, due to his lack of discipline in registering them and defending his copyrights, but the general consensus brings them close to 2,200 titles.

<sup>92</sup>Including symphonies, symphonic poems, instrumental concertos, an opera, an oratorio, film music, chamber music, tango-ballads and countless tangos for the most diverse instrumental ensembles.

tango, jazz and classical performers, all of them at the top of the scale in their respective musical areas. The third characteristic is the improvisatory character of all his performances. His relationship with the written text ties Piazzolla to Baroque traditions as well as jazz practices. Again,

[early historical recordings of composers playing their own compositions] show how the melodic and harmonic framework was filled out by the composer, especially in the case of jazz. Haendel himself also frequently dispensed with writing down the organ part since he too often decided on the spur of the moment what the musical occasion demanded.<sup>93</sup>

This is true regarding most bandoneón parts in Piazzolla's compositions. One could say that they are notoriously incomplete, skeletal in design, meant to be fleshed out on the stage under the inspiration of the moment. The first movement of the *Concerto for bandoneón and Orchestra*, for example, contains two cadenzas. The only indication for the first of them is: "Cadencia de bandoneón ad libitum, improvisando tempo, armonías, melodías (lo más parecido a música de Buenos Aires.)"<sup>94</sup> The second cadenza limits the "guidelines" to the remark "Cadencia de bandoneón – ad libitum."<sup>95</sup> The work was clearly intended to be performed by the author. Also, the divergences between the actual performances by Piazzolla of his *Double Concerto for bandoneón, guitar and string orchestra* or his *Concerto for bandoneón and orchestra* and the published scores reach, at times, a point where it becomes difficult to recognize the compositions.

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<sup>93</sup>E. H., op. cit.

<sup>94</sup>*Bandoneón cadenza ad libitum, improvise tempo, harmonies and melodies (as close as possible to Buenos Aires music).*

<sup>95</sup>*Bandoneón cadenza – ad libitum.*

These transformations are operated through a collection of patterns of rhythmic alteration (including rubato and *swing*) and melodic ornamentation that often correspond with astonishing accuracy to well-established patterns of Baroque ornamentation, particularly to Italian Baroque diminutions. Some of these procedures might also have been borrowed from jazz improvisation techniques, but given the historical and biographical context in which Piazzolla's model of musicianship developed, it is highly unlikely that their use by Piazzolla had anything to do with explicit stylistic imitation or an anachronistic intention.<sup>96</sup> Instead, the concept of *convergent evolution*,<sup>97</sup> of ample application in the fields of linguistics and evolutionary biology, may be taken as a starting point. The utilization of Baroque procedures by Piazzolla, thus, could be seen as the result of the development of a model of musicianship parallel to the one from which present-day musicians inherited Baroque ornamentation and the major contrapuntal forms of Western music.

The main aspects of Piazzolla's melodic variation procedures will be analyzed in the following sections.

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<sup>96</sup>In the way that, for example, Alfred Schnittke could have done it, under the idea of "polystylistic collage."

<sup>97</sup>In evolutionary biology, the process whereby organisms not closely related, independently evolve similar traits as a result of having to adapt to similar environments or ecological niches. In linguistics, the process whereby languages head along similar yet separate evolutionary paths.

## A) Ornaments

## A.1) “Stammering” trills

Piazzolla would often attack repeatedly and in *accelerando* a note annotated in the score as a long duration note. See the third bar of the following example:

**Ex. 42 – Verano Porteño**

Upper line: melody as published. Middle line: as played by Piazzolla. Lower line: double bass part.

Sometimes the “stammering” trill is hinted at in the score by a repeating note of short value. In performance, as a rule, the metric space covered by these notes is filled with additional notes and is rhythmically shaped, be that in the form of an *accelerando* – *ritardando* rubato, just *accelerando*, just *ritardando*, or otherwise. This resource admirably fits the description of the *trillo* by Giulio Caccini in *Le Nuove Musiche* (1602):<sup>98</sup> a rapid repetition of the same note, usually beginning slowly, becoming more rapid. According to Frederick Neumann, both the *staccato* and *legato* styles of execution were used by the early Baroque performers.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Giulio Caccini, *Nuove Musiche e nuova maniera de scriverle*, Firenze, 1614. Studio Per Edizioni Scelte, reedition 1983.

<sup>99</sup> Neumann, Frederick, *Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-baroque Music: With Special Emphasis on J. S. Bach* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983): 13–17.

A.2) Turns (*grupetti*), mordents, *acciaccaturas* and slides.

Piazzolla's use of these ornamentations was extensive. Only some specific features about the way he performed them will be pointed out.

A.2.a) *Turn (grupetto)*. As a general observation, it can be said that Piazzolla employed the turn, or *grupetto*, in his improvisations to prepare melodic jumps of a particular harmonic value, or to gain momentum for an ensuing scalar passage, usually a diminution. See, for example:

The image shows two musical examples comparing original notation with Piazzolla's performance. Example 1 (m. 12) shows an original part with a single note and a performance with a turn (a series of sixteenth notes) leading to the same note. Example 2 (m. 16) shows an original part with a note and a performance with a turn (a series of sixteenth notes) leading to a note, followed by an appoggiatura (a note with a slur) and "real" notes. The performance examples include fingerings: 5 for the first example and 6 and 5 for the second.

**Ex. 43a and 43b - Oblivion**

Another characteristic feature of Piazzolla's performance of the turns is that, for dramatic effect, he would sometimes stay slightly longer on the lower note of the turn, thus delaying its resolution.

A.2.b) *Mordents*.<sup>100</sup> Mordents are often found in Piazzolla's music, either as an improvised ornament or spelled out in the music text, and either as pre-beat short notes or as grace notes. He executed them in a particularly nervous, energetic manner. A curious combination results when what could be considered a spelled-out pre-beat mordent is combined with a grace note mordent, as in the case of the coda of *Melancólico Buenos Aires*:

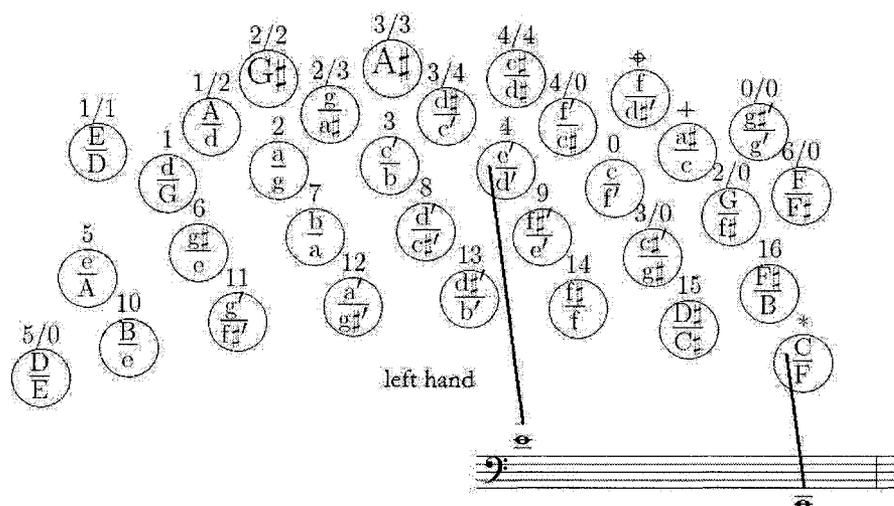
<sup>100</sup>The word *mordent* is used here in its modern meaning, i. e. as a rapid single alternation between an indicated note, the note *above*, and the indicated note again.

The musical score for Ex. 44 shows a bandoneón part for measures 101-103. The right hand (treble clef) begins with a half note G4 (marked *mp*), followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5. The left hand (bass clef) begins with a half note G2 (marked *mp*), followed by quarter notes A2, B2, and C3. The score includes dynamic markings of *mp* and *mf*.

**Ex. 44 – *Melancólico Buenos Aires* – m. 101 - Bandoneón part**

A.2.c) *Acciaccaturas*. *Acciaccaturas* of the most diverse interval span are found in Piazzolla's bandoneón parts. This is not surprising given the singular disposition of the buttons of the bandoneón. The left hand in particular allows the musician to simultaneously play notes widely separated in register (Fig. 6.)

The distance between the notes indicated in Fig. 6 (below) is approximately three inches, easily taken either as a bichord or as an *acciaccatura* with the index and little fingers. Whenever Piazzolla wrote *acciaccaturas*, or his musicians improvised them, they were idiomatically adjusted to the different instruments.



**Fig. 6 – Bandoneón: Left hand buttons.**

*The notes correspond to the buttons during the opening motion of the bellow.*

Among the different acciaccaturas – written or improvised – that Piazzolla used to ornament his performances, a frequent one is the perfect octave acciaccatura, also known as the *Ciriaco Octave*, which is discussed in a separate chapter.

One idiosyncratic way of playing half-tone acciaccaturas was to attack both notes together, effectively producing a minor second dissonant bichord, then releasing the dissonant note and keeping only the fundamental toward the very end of the ornamented note. Played on the bandoneón, with its penetrating timbre, this manner of playing the acciaccaturas has a particularly cutting effect.

A famous example is the beginning of *Primavera Porteña*:

**Ex. 45 – Primavera Porteña – solo bandoneón**  
*Descriptive notation*

A.2.d) *Slides*. The term “slide” (Fr. *coulé*; Ger. *Schleifer*) is applied in Baroque music to a two-note ornament whose tones rise diatonically to the principal note and are slurred to it. This ornament has been utilized and discussed by prominent Baroque authorities like Gottlieb Muffat, Kuhnau and Carl Ph. E. Bach. The direction of the Baroque slide is usually upward with the ornament on the beat, but downward motion is also found, and an unaccented interpretation is occasionally possible. A variation of the slide, shown in treatises by Agricola and C. P. E. Bach, is the double appoggiatura (*Anschlag*). It had no special sign but was indicated by small notes. The use of the term “slide” is limited here to the two-note slide, since “multitone patterns [i.e.: slides of more than two notes] (called *tirata* in Italian, *coulade* in French, and *Pfeil* in German) are generally *Zwischenschlag* types and belong properly to the diminutions.”<sup>101</sup>

All of the slides mentioned above are present in Piazzolla’s improvisations, plus a type that apparently was unknown to (or rejected by) Baroque authors: the chromatic slide. Given the expressive parallelism between

<sup>101</sup> Frederick Neumann, op. cit., p. 203–204. *Zwischenschlag* means a grace note that connects two equally parent notes.

the slurred chromatic motion in the bandoneón and the *glissando* and *portamenti* on stringed instruments, this type of slide might as well be considered a short form of chromatic diminution in Piazzolla's case. The main difference from the *arrastre* or the *cromático* ("chromatic [pick-up]") is that this slide fulfills a melodic rather than harmonic or rhythmic role.

### A.3) Diminutions

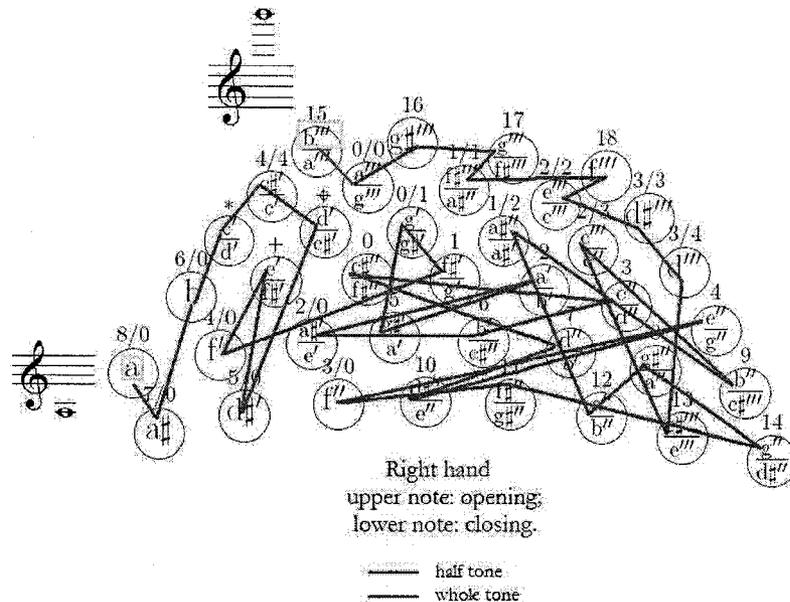
Diminutions, a specific characteristic of the Italian Baroque ornamentation school defined as "embellishments of a written melody whereby the melody is broken up ('diminished') into smaller note values,"<sup>102</sup> are ubiquitous in Piazzolla's performances, especially in slow movements or sections.

A.3.a) *Chromatic filling-in*. Given the particular layout of the bandoneón's buttons, it is often easier and better for agility to play chromatic rather than diatonic scales, especially on the right hand. Although it is difficult to speak about an ordered layout of the buttons (the bandoneonists themselves often regard this disposition as absolutely chaotic), there is an overall direction of the fingering of the chromatic scale that gives it a certain fluidity (see Fig. 7).

This is reflected by the extended practice, by Piazzolla and other bandoneonists, of filling in some intervals chromatically. When played with a proper sense of musical direction and a smooth *legato*, the result is a good approximation to the *glissando* on stringed instruments. This chromatic filling-in is a tool that can be classified as an intermediate step between the violin's *portamento* and the filling-in of an interval with a scalar diminution:

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<sup>102</sup>Ibid.



**Fig. 7 – The chromatic scale in the right hand of the bandoneón, opening.**

The examples of this chromatic filling-in are countless in Piazzolla's performances. Only a few of them will be presented, that have a particularly strong effect on the character of the melody, or significantly alter it:

The image shows two staves of musical notation for Ex. 46. The top staff is labeled 'Bando as published' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Bando as performed'. Both staves are in 2/4 time and feature a melodic line in the upper voice and a rhythmic accompaniment in the lower voice. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The notation includes various rhythmic values, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The 'Bando as performed' version includes some chromatic alterations and triplets that are not present in the 'Bando as published' version.

**Ex. 46 – Primavera Porteña – end of section A – mm. 52 – 55**

Bando Solo  
as published

Bando Solo  
realization

**Ex. 47 – Double Concerto for bandoneón, guitar and string orchestra.**  
**Introduction. Published part: © Editions Henry Lemoine, Paris 1985. Performance:**  
**Astor Piazzolla, bandoneón; Alvaro Pierri, Guitar; Kölner Rundfunk-Orchester,**  
**Conductor: Pinchas Steinberg. A WDR/TRANSTEL Production.**  
*(Rhythmic alterations were not transcribed. For clarity, bars that did not undergo  
substantial modification through diminutions were left blank in the lower line.)*

A.3.b) *Arpeggio-diminutions*. Although not the most frequent form of diminutions found in Piazzolla's performance, diminutions and variations in the form of arpeggios, whenever they happen, add an important element of harmonic color and create a dramatic gesture by means of reaching a wider register than scalar diminutions within the same time span. A prominent example of this effect is found in Piazzolla's paradigmatic sample of his improvisatory style, "Oblivion."



**Ex. 48 – *Oblivion*.** Upper line: solo part as published. Lower line: descriptive annotation of Piazzolla's ornamentation

A.3.c) *Broken thirds and scalar diminutions*. As early as in the first of Christoph Bernhard's three treatises<sup>103</sup> we find the ornament called *superjectio* or *accentus*, defined as an escape tone or upper auxiliary and used to embellish descending scalar passages.



**Ex. 49 – Superjectio after Christoph Bernhard**

<sup>103</sup> **Christoph Bernhard** (1628–1692), a disciple of Schütz, wrote three influential treatises on music around 1660. The first of them, devoted entirely to the art of vocal ornamentation, has a special significance because it shows Bernhard's firsthand knowledge of Italian practices. Bernhard's first treatise is indeed considered the single most important theoretical source on Italian ornamentation practices in mid-17<sup>th</sup> century.

This ornamental technique, usually mixed with regular scalar (diatonic) diminutions, was widely employed by A. Piazzolla.

91

Bando as published

Bando as performed

3

**Ex. 50 – Concerto for bandoneón and orchestra. 2<sup>nd</sup> mov., mm. 91 – 92**

The following example shows how the two kinds of diminutions combine:

60

Lento

Melody as published

Melody as played by Piazzolla

mf

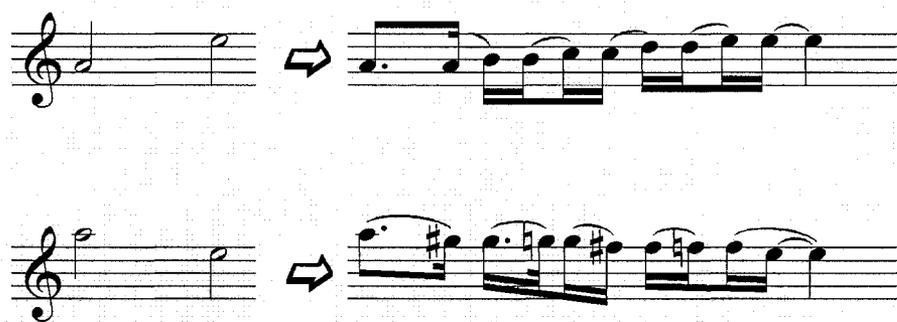
6

64

**Ex. 51 – Primavera Porteña – section B – m. 60**

In this example, in order to fill the octave gap that appears in the original melody between the pick-up to measure 64 and the strong beat of 64, a seemingly scalar diminution starts (see lower line, m. 63, third beat.) However, once initiated, it turns into a “superjectio” of itself (see lower line, m. 64, first and second beats), creating an ornamentation of an ornamentation – a procedure often found in Piazzolla’s improvisations.

A.3.d) *Scalar diminutions with note doubling.* A particular form of scalar diminution, both chromatic and diatonic, is found in Piazzolla's own performance and in the solos of several of the musicians under his direction. This form consists of filling in an interval either diatonically (ascending or descending) or chromatically (usually descending) but playing each note twice, and slurring the second note of each pair to the next note:



Ex. 52

Note the dotting in the second line of Ex. 52. The application of *swing* to this kind of diminution is very common in Piazzolla's performance and is coherent with the dramatic effect of the note doubling scalar diminutions, which gives additional momentum to the scalular motion. Again, as in the case of the "stammering" trill, the increase in the number of notes and rhythmic figures that fill in the interval gives the performer more control over the shape of the musical gesture. Generally, Piazzolla would begin this diminution more slowly, then add some swing, speeding up toward a stream-like motion of equal duration fast notes. Here are some examples from Piazzolla's performances:

**Ex. 53 – *Verano Porteño* – central section.** Upper line: melody as published; lower line: realization by Piazzolla.

The next example illustrates a number of note doubling diminutions and their combination with other diminution formulae:

**Ex. 54 – *Invierno Porteño* – bridge to coda.** (ND = note-doubling)

## B) Ostinato

After Piazzolla's imitative counterpoint, the next most common characteristic of his music is his predilection for ostinati.<sup>104</sup> "Ostinato" (Italian: 'obstinate') is, according to the *Grove Music Online Dictionary*, "A term used to refer to the repetition of a musical pattern many times in succession while other musical elements are generally changing." The same article points out that ostinato is extremely widespread in oral musical traditions and, after having

<sup>104</sup>Both 'ostinati' and 'ostinatos' are accepted English plural forms.

enjoyed a “Golden Age” during the Baroque period and a decline during the Classical and Romantic eras, it reappeared in other guises in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>105</sup> The question of the use of ostinato in the works by Astor Piazzolla was lucidly discussed by Ramón Pelinski in a lecture for the *Astor Piazzolla Symposium* at the City University of New York in 2000.<sup>106</sup> What follows is the lecture’s general idea and some relevant quotations from it.

Following a proposal by Richard Middleton,<sup>107</sup> based in turn on a terminological classification outlined by Philip Tagg,<sup>108</sup> Pelinski distinguishes between musematic and discursive ostinati. Musematic ostinati are based upon the repetition of short units, models, or formulae; they tend ideally to the statism of a one-note pedal figure and extend to one to two measures. Structurally, this kind of ostinati can be linked to Afro-American “riffs.” See Ex. 55 and 56:

31 Lento = 54  
Pizz. Arco Pizz. Arco Pizz. Arco Pizz. Arco

The musical notation is a single staff in bass clef. It begins with a circled number '31' and the tempo marking 'Lento = 54'. The piece starts with a Pizzicato (Pizz.) section, indicated by a downward-pointing triangle above the staff. This is followed by an Arco section, indicated by the word 'Arco' above the staff. The pattern of Pizz. and Arco sections repeats throughout the excerpt. The notes are primarily eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. The key signature has one sharp (F#).

**Ex. 55 – *Otoño Porteño* – middle slow section – double bass part**

<sup>105</sup>Laure Schnapper, 'Ostinato,' *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy  
<<http://www.grovemusic.com>> (accessed 05 December 2007)

<sup>106</sup>This lecture was later published as an article: Ramón Pelinski, “Ostinato y placer de la repetición en la música de Astor Piazzolla,” *Revista del Instituto Superior de Música, Universidad Nacional del Litoral*, 9 (August 2002): 29–39.

<sup>107</sup>Richard Middleton, “‘Play it again, Sam’: Some Notes on the Productivity of Repetition in Popular Music,” *Popular Music* 3, *Producers and Markets* (1983): 235–270.

<sup>108</sup>Philip Tagg, “Analysing Popular Music: Theory, Method and Practice,” *Popular Music* 2, *Theory and Method* (1982): 37–67.



**Ex. 56 – *Buenos Aires Hora Cero* – beginning – double bass part**

Discursive ostinati, on the other hand, tend to be more dynamic; they may include, in Piazzolla's music, up to eight measures, and encompass a variety of harmonic changes.

**Ex. 57 – *La Muerte del Angel* – mm. 18 – 21**

**Ex. 58 – *Otoño Porteño* – mm. 1 – 4. Piano part**

A shared feature of both types of ostinati – musematic and discursive – is that they often lead into sections formed by sequential progressions. The function of these progressions is to lead the redundant motion of an ostinato into new tonal areas.

A common element between the Baroque *basso ostinato* and the ostinato in Piazzolla is that “the redundancy of the ostinato repetitions finds itself in dialectic relationship with the invention of the foreground. From this point of view, Piazzolla has a soul affinity with Vivaldi: both of them composed 400 times the same concerto, their imagination, however, being inexhaustible at composing always new foreground surfaces.”<sup>109</sup> The role of composer-virtuoso that both Piazzolla and Vivaldi incarnated leads convergently to a similar treatment of the role of the bass.

A second important Baroque, yet extra-musical, element in the use of ostinati by Piazzolla is the link between this repetitive musical tool and the forms of musical production. Indeed, “[what psychobiological and psychoanalytical interpretations of repetition fail to show is] the pragmatic perspectives that constrain the (professional) activity of musicians: somebody like Piazzolla, who was not a university composer but a freelance one who lived from his compositions and concerts (to pay for the production of *María de Buenos Aires* he had to sell his car) cannot do without using the repetition of ready-made materials. This procedure links Piazzolla to Bach, [...] and the jazzmen with every kind of cultural producers of contemporary capitalism.”<sup>110</sup>

### C) *Rubato*

The importance of studying *rubato* in Piazzolla’s performances stems from the already presented and argued position that his recorded performances are

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<sup>109</sup> Ramón Pelinski (2002), op. cit. p. 15.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

essential to the understanding of his published scores. At the same time, establishing hard and fast rules for something by definition so irregular as *rubato* is impossible. However, there are two important, distinctive traits of his improvisational procedures that can be described and analyzed to a certain extent, and applied to the performance of his works, in chamber, solo and orchestral settings.

In order to describe these procedures, I would like to establish the concept of basic structural tension in a melody. "Basic structural tension" implies the degree of emotional tension intrinsic to a melody. This tension is achieved by the particular combination of intervals and rhythms that creates the melody in its basic identifiable form and, in the case of Western tonal music, by the harmonic implications of the melody for the listener. Even in an un-emotional rendering, such as a performance of a MIDI file by a computer, a single melody has a number of elements that create expectation (tension) and resolve it (for example, cadential resolutions). The basic structural tension, then, is the emotional tension that a melody is able to trigger in the listener through its most basic elements, enough for the listener to follow the melody as a unit and to grasp its structural inflection points.

A comparison of the melodies as they appear in published scores of Piazzolla's works with the actual pitches and rhythms played by him (or by musicians under his immediate music direction), shows clearly that, the number of divergences aside, even when Piazzolla annotated all the pitches that were

actually played, he and his musicians managed to add in performance a level of tension that cannot be reflected by musical notation.

The performance means to that end could be generally defined as *rubato*, but more properly would be described as horizontal shifts of the rhythmic design. The main difference between these two phenomena is that the Piazzollean horizontal shifts focus on elements smaller than whole phrases or periods - it may be applied to just one note, or a collection of two or three notes, at the same time without altering the overall rhythmic pace of the phrase. Here is where the main distinction between the Romantic *rubato* and the Piazzollean *rubato* should be seen.

These horizontal shifts can be classified roughly into two categories: those improvised during performance and not reflected by musical writing, and those that, having stemmed from the performance practice of instrumental and vocal *rubato*, have become standard rhythmic formulae, reflected by musical writing in the form of rhythmic augmentation, compression and cross-barline syncopation. This written-out *rubato* has far-reaching consequences for the phrase structure of Piazzolla's music. This aspect of the interrelation between Piazzolla's tango performance manner and the formal structure of his compositions has been discussed briefly, but shrewdly, by Martín Kutnowski.<sup>111</sup> To illustrate this category, Ex. 59 (below) presents a number of basic implied melodic formulae and their realizations by means of written-out rhythmic contractions, as found in Piazzolla's scores and performances:

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<sup>111</sup>Martín Kutnowski, *op. cit.* p. 106–113.

The image displays three musical examples of rhythmic contractions. Each example shows a source melody on the left and its contracted version on the right, connected by a double arrow (⇒). The source melodies are marked with an asterisk (\*).

- Adios Nonino:** The source melody is a sequence of notes. The contracted version has a box around the final two notes, which are played closer together than in the original.
- La Muerte del Angel:** The source melody is a sequence of notes. The contracted version has a box around the final two notes, which are played closer together than in the original.
- Fuga y Misterio:** The source melody is a sequence of notes. The contracted version has a box around the final two notes, which are played closer together than in the original.

### Ex. 59. Written-out rhythmic contractions

As for the first category (i.e. shifts improvised during performance), it comprises the use of the same technique but in degrees and forms that prevented them from undergoing standardization and fixation by means of musical notation. Perhaps here lies the signature of Piazzolla as an interpreter, and thus the difficulty in presenting an analysis of these procedures. Since a taxonomy of Piazzolla's rubato is hardly a possibility, a good way to describe it from an artistic point of view is, in my opinion, to treat the basic structural tension of Piazzolla's melodies as an expressive but rather impersonal emotional result of sticking to the rhythmic grid, as if each of these melodies were a regular line of telegraph posts, and his rubato as a continuous game of hide-and-seek around them. The position of each note in the melodic row assigns it a standard function or meaning in the melody. Piazzolla's endless anticipation, delay and regrouping of these notes sound sometimes as a witty, tongue-in-cheek, irreverent commentary on their stiffness, sometimes as an anxious, desperate fight against

the imprisoning boundaries of musical time and space, and sometimes, as in *Oblivion* (From *Suite Remembrance*) and in many places of his *Suite Lumière*, as the gestures of a thaumaturgist “modeling the incoherent and vertiginous matter of which dreams are composed.”<sup>112</sup>

In conclusion, the combination of Piazzolla’s basic melodic lines with his ornamentation practices and rubato, as shown in this chapter, created a unique way of singing the melody and treating the tango sound. This new language was solidly rooted in historical performance practices, from both classical and tango fields, but the result was something so individual that it defined forever the musical face of the *New Tango* and its creator, Astor Piazzolla. Only a deep knowledge of this new voice can enable the conductor to communicate the subtle palette of emotions that it expresses and guide the orchestra toward a successful rendering.

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<sup>112</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Las Ruinas Circulares* (The Circular Ruins), from *Ficciones* (Fictions), 1951.

## CHAPTER V

## TANGO SPECIAL EFFECTS

*Yeites* and Piazzolla – Introduction

The word *yeite* is presumed to have a Galician origin (*xeito*). In its singular form, out of any musical context, “*yeite*” is defined by the dictionary of *lunfardo* as “Occasion. Issue, matter. Doubtful matter” but also as “Resort, scheme that benefits the person who runs it.”<sup>113</sup> Among musicians it is used more often in plural to refer, in a general sense, to the special effects specific to tango style.

All of the sources consulted for this research, both bibliographical and direct, point either specifically at De Caro's Sextet or more generally the tango ensembles contemporary to De Caro as the origin of the *yeites*. For example, in a recording of the celebrated tango “El Monito” (July 19, 1928, Buenos Aires. RCA-Victor 80906 44224) by Julio De Caro's Orchestra, we can clearly hear the *lija* effect, beats on the body of the double bass, and double bass glissandi that prefigure the *yumba*.<sup>114</sup>

Some other special effects were common in the 30s. In “El Amanecer,” by Roberto Firpo, premiered in 1911, and recorded by the author in 1928, bird-calls and knocks on the violins are called for in the score and, of course, heard in the recording. Many tangos include a line for whistling (for example, “Mala Junta” by De Caro and Laurenz).

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<sup>113</sup>José Gobello, *Nuevo Diccionario Lunfardo* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Corregidor, 1994), entry “Yeite.”

<sup>114</sup>Note that this is a 1928 recording, when Piazzolla was still a seven-year old boy living in New York.

One might reasonably question the relevance of these *yeites* and seriously wonder to what extent they are an important part of Piazzolla's musical language. After all, they sound "just" like noises or percussion. Two testimonies may help place the *yeites* in the right context.

The first testimony is a "Decalogue," presumably written by Piazzolla in 1955, that set out the artistic objectives of his proposed tango revolution and defined the aims and function of the ensemble he had created to that end. The document is reproduced in full in the Azzi – Collier book<sup>115</sup> about Piazzolla. Its eighth point is quoted here:

*8) The use of instruments never before included in tango bands (electric guitar) and other effects (percussion), as well as the overall structure of the works with their modern trend, will be explained before each performance, so as to facilitate an immediate understanding of them.*

The Octeto de Buenos Aires (OBA), we should remember, was made up of two bandoneons, two violins, cello, double bass, piano and electric guitar. It did not include any percussion instruments. So, when Piazzolla referred to "percussion" in the "Decalogue," he was unequivocally referring to the percussive effects on the non-percussion instruments of the OBA. Furthermore, since it has been shown – and Piazzolla himself, as well as any other tango professional or aficionado could not ignore it – that percussive and other unorthodox effects were used prior to Piazzolla's appearance in the musical arena, one might

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<sup>115</sup>María Susana Azzi and Simon Collier, *Le grand tango: the life and music of Astor Piazzolla* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000): 57–58.

wonder why they had to be “explained” at all. The answer lies in Piazzolla’s own music and his recordings; it was the *extent* and *manner* of use of these effects that was so modern, so revolutionary, so different from anything done before him and so important to his innovative thrust, that they needed be explained (and, probably, justified) to the tango audiences on equal footing with the inclusion of the electric guitar (a sort of tango sacrilege for the traditional tango audience) and the “overall structure of the works with their modern trend.”

If this indirect testimony were not enough, a direct testimony of one of the closest associates of Piazzolla will make the point eloquently. The following paragraph is extracted from a personal email from Fernando Suárez Paz. The subject of the discussion was his work as a tango consultant for several famous non-tango musicians, in this particular case, the Kronos Quartet:

Al siguiente día de regresar de una gira por Europa, que eran muy cansadoras, me llama desde S.Francisco pidiéndome que viaje urgente porque los del Kronos no sabían tocar, yo le dije que era imposible, que era uno de los mejores cuartetos del mundo, insistió tanto que tuve que viajar, ya te imaginás lo que ellos no sabían, eran los efectos y el swing tanguero, que eso no lo sabe hacer nadie si no nació acá.<sup>116</sup>

This testimony shows convincingly to what point Piazzolla considered these idiomatic effects, the *yeites*, a part of his aesthetics and his musical language – he asked the violinist of this quintet to travel 6,000 miles after an exhausting European tour just to explain them to the Kronos Quartet, who were

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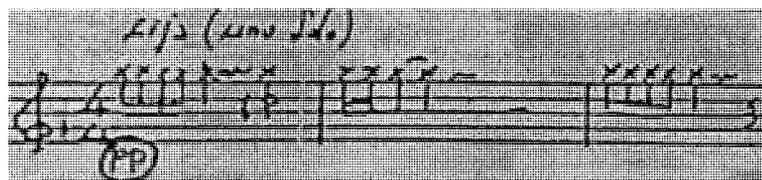
<sup>116</sup>“The next day, after coming back from one of these European tours, that were always very tiring, [Piazzolla] called me from San Francisco asking me to urgently travel [to the US] because the people of Kronos didn’t know how to play. I told him that that was impossible, that they are one of the best quartets in the world. He insisted so much that I just had to travel. As you should have already figured out, what they did not know were the [special] effects, the tango swing, and that is something that nobody knows how to do unless he was born here [in Buenos Aires.]” Spelling left unchanged.

about to premiere *Four for Tango*.<sup>117</sup> The evaluation of these idiomatic effects that Mr. Suárez Paz does is also noteworthy – he expresses the feeling, shared by most tango professional musicians, that the *yeites* are such a culturally idiosyncratic thing, that no one can really learn them unless born and raised in Buenos Aires. The historical rooting of the *yeites* and these short but extremely eloquent testimonies are enough to justify a detailed study of these effects by those who intend a serious approach to the performance of Piazzolla's compositions.

### *Lija or Chicharra*

#### *Notation conventions*

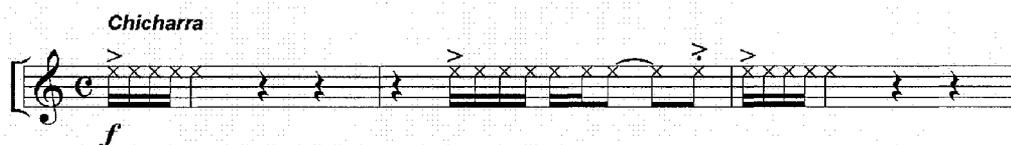
In most tango parts the *lija* effect is notated with x-headed notes on the fourth space of the music staff, or on the first additional space above or below. This is an example from a manuscript by the famous arranger and member of some of Piazzolla's ensembles, José Bragato:



Ex. 60

<sup>117</sup>It is no accident that the published edition of *Four for Tango*, which appeared shortly thereafter, was Piazzolla's first published work that included an attempt to explain and systematically annotate these special effects.

My personal preference is the use of the fourth space with x-shaped notes, reserving the lower position for the *tambor* (to be discussed in a separate chapter).



**Ex. 61**

Since *lija* parts never contain any duration value longer than a quarter, or a dotted or syncopated quarter, there is no need for white noteheads.

#### *Description*

*Lija* - literally, “sandpaper” – also known as *chicharra* – “cicada” – is one of the most characteristic tango special effects. Technically, it consists of a sound obtained on the D string of the violin by playing with the bow on the segment of the string between the bridge and the tailpiece.

Any tango musician that has ever tried to teach this technique to a classically trained colleague can confirm that the assimilation of the *lija* is more difficult than it might seem, and sometimes, it is never reached. My personal experience supports this scenario. This situation has several different causes, and the examination of some of these causes partly sheds light on the different approaches by tango musicians and classically trained musicians as to the act of performing and their attitudes to their instruments.

The first cause of the failure to properly execute *lija* is plainly the lack of detailed explanation – another consequence of the empirical approach to the

teaching of tango instrumental skills. For a satisfactory delivery of the *lija*, the following conditions are needed:

*I. Choice of the right string.*

Usually, it is the violin (when there is just one violin), or the solo violin of a violin section, which is in charge of the *lija*. In this case, there is no doubt that the *lija* should be played on the D string. However, *lija* for the viola is also found in some tango arrangements. In this case, the decision should be made (either by the performer, the music director, or the conductor) on the basis of the qualities of the specific instrument and the characteristics of the strings used by the performer. Experience shows that some violas respond better on the G string (which is the positional equivalent of the violin D string). This is particularly true for violas with metal strings. However, most violas, especially when equipped with gut, perlon or other soft strings, render their optimal *lija* sound on the D string.

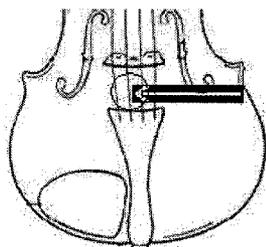
It is theoretically possible to have *lija* performed by the cellos as well, although this research did not discover any case of Piazzolla having used this kind of *lija*. I tried it in an arrangement of Piazzolla's *Melancólico Buenos Aires* for string trio and bandoneón<sup>118</sup> in a highly complex polymetric rhythmic section (this piece was originally composed for an octet). The timbric results were unsatisfactory, no matter what string was chosen, and, after some performances and many tries, at the price of slightly impoverishing the rhythmic fabric of the passage, the “cello *lija*” was abandoned.

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<sup>118</sup>Premiered by Cuartetango during its CD presentation American Tour, October 2005.

### *II. Choice of the right spot of the string: Optimal Lija Spot (OLS).*

Many string performers and conductors tend to think that it is enough to play “behind the bridge” to obtain the *lija*. This is not the case. The truth is that the *lija* sound comes out only when the bow presses a precise spot of that segment of the string behind the bridge, bringing out subharmonics of the fundamental.<sup>119</sup> This spot is located within the section of the string covered by thread, and is usually found approximately in the middle of it (Fig. 8 below).



**Fig. 8 – Optimal Lija spot.**

Playing on the other side of the bridge but not on the OLS just produces a squeaky sound, not the desired effect. Finding the OLS takes some trying when one is attempting this technique for the first time or, even if one has mastered it, when performing it on a new, unfamiliar violin.

### *III. Correct use of the bow.*

A) *Hold*. For reasons difficult to understand, the traditional bow hold does not render a good *lija* sound. A possible explanation is that the traditional bow hold implies a certain amount of embedded “dragging” toward the bridge, in order to keep the sound bright and to compensate for eventual displacement of the bow away from the “brilliancy” zone, whereas for the *lija* the bow pressure should be completely vertical and very focused on the OLS. Another possible reason is that, because of their rhythmic nature, *lija* passages demand that the

<sup>119</sup>This technique is not unrelated to the “ugly” subharmonics used in Gypsy-Romanian folk music and the subharmonic technique developed by the Japanese violinist and composer Mari Kimura.

performer play with a very free and active right wrist. The traditional bow hold, which allows such freedom up to a minimal distance of six inches away from the player's face, is ill-fitted to play almost on the tailpiece, due to the resulting unnatural bending of the wrist. This position, which is usually the one adopted by violinists that attempt this technique for the first time, but have never seen it executed before, almost completely limits the wrist's mobility and forces the arm to move as a jointless whole. This awkwardness of motion makes it extremely difficult to play the rhythmic figures normally associated with the *lija*.

The optimal bow hold for *lija* rather resembles the holding of a pen, paper cutter, or palette knife. In this position, the type of articulation required by the *lija* passages is much easier to accomplish. The *Lija* Bow Hold (LBH) represents no difficulty in itself. The existing difficulty is associated with the switching between traditional bow hold and LBH, a movement which is almost completely automatic and instantaneous for the tango performer. For the classically trained musician, this might result in much discomfort, particularly when the *lija* passage is followed almost immediately, with scarcely any pause, by the normal violin passage, which is usually the case. The switch is problematic not only because of the hold, but also because of the different positions of the bow regarding the body of the player. Classically trained musicians do not have the acquired skill to play but at one fixed distance. Any deviation from this standard distance is perceived as an "accident," and therefore can be maintained only at the price of a continuous effort to restrain the almost bodily reflex to correct the "accident." Since the very nature of *lija* is soloistic, and it is executed almost always by only one violin, it

can be considered a good tango arranging practice to adhere to the principle of allowing some time for the *lija* performer to return to his normal bow hold, even at the price of skipping one or two bars of an ensuing tutti. The same is true for assigning the *lija* line to the principal second violin instead of the concertmaster, when both violin sections are used simultaneously.

*B) Positioning of the bow hair.* In order to obtain the subharmonic of the “short” part of the string, the whole width of the bow hair should be in contact with the string, and the bow should be wholly perpendicular to the string. The slightly tilted position, which is characteristic to many schools of violin technique, would only produce a tiny, toy-like *lija* sound.

*C) Bow pressure and bow speed.* The sensation of roughness that the *lija* sound evokes in the ears of musicians educated in the classical academic European aesthetic often induces these performers to exert a roughness with the string. Indeed, even when all the other elements of this technique have been properly explained, performers new to it tend to press too much and to move the bow too slowly. The bow pressure needed for *lija* is not greater than the one needed for an orchestral mezzo-forte on a G string, and the bow speed, although variable, goes from somewhat slower than a calm *detaché* for tenuto notes to the normal speed of *spiccato* for short notes.

*D) Bow sector.* All the *lija* parts should be played within ten to twelve centimeters (four to five inches) to the frog. Both the natural weight and the particular tension of the bow hair characteristic of this sector of the bow are important elements of the *lija*.

#### IV. Articulation and rhythm

The *lija* passages appear normally in polymetric sections, and are usually associated with meters and rhythmic figures that operate “over the barline” (like the [333322] meter) or “over the normal accents” (like [332]). Part of the musical appeal of the *lija* is that it gives the offbeat accents extra crispness, thus enhancing the contrast between meters in polymetric textures. It is important, however, to point out that in tango scores (meaning scores for the professional tango musician) the notation of the *lija* passages – which usually are not even fully annotated – completely omits the variety of accents, the leaning points and the “tenuto” parts that characterize them, and thus any notational clues that might allow one to distinguish between the time signature and the real metric structure of the passage are totally absent. Here is an example of a transcription of a performance, by the A.P.Q., of *Invierno Porteño*, including seven bars of a *lija* part as played by violinist Fernando Suárez Paz:

Allegro agitato (126)

94 *Lija* 1 solo  
gli altri

98 tutti unis.  
rit. molto diminuendo *p*

Ex. 62

In the same spot on Piazzolla's score, the only indication for the performer was the word *lija*.

Therefore, in certain cases, especially when dealing with transcriptions of Piazzolla's works, the performer (in the case of solo or chamber performances) or the conductor, has to provide a realized part of *lifa* in passages where such an improvisation would take place. Here, as in many other matters concerning Piazzolla's work, the master's own recorded performances should serve as a guide.

So, assuming that a full *lifa* passage has been written and it has been annotated in conformity with the real meters in which this line is played, the question of the articulation still remains. In *lifa* passages, basically three types of articulation are found:

1. *Regular sixteenths (R16)*. One might equate this articulation to the regular detaché. It is played with a proportionately short bow (approximately one to one-and-half centimeters), in full contact with the string. They usually come in groups of four or two. When played in groups of four, usually the first of them would be slightly accented:



**Ex. 63 – Regular sixteenths**

2. *Tenuto*. The bow speed should be slower, but the note is longer and sustained. This element is typically interspersed with the R16. See:



**Ex. 64 – Tenuto**



V. *Acoustical model.* *Lija* is an idiomatic, traditional element of tango, and, as with many linguistic phenomena, the criterion for distinguishing right from wrong is the assimilation and internalization of a model. In the process of teaching *lija* to classically trained musicians, the tango musician often would stumble upon the problem that, while certain *lijas* sound perfectly good to him and certain others do not, he finds himself unable to explain why. Also, in this particular case, aesthetic descriptions are not helpful, because at this very point all possible *lijas* probably sound equally ugly to the classically trained musician. In my experience, after some days of regular work, professional musicians start to assimilate the acoustical model of *lija*, provided that somebody can show it to them. The orchestral conductor who is not himself a violin player will have a harder time in this regard. But playing *lija* is, more than anything else, a matter of familiarizing oneself with an acoustic model, and secondarily, of learning an unorthodox technique. Once these difficulties have been overcome, the artistic sensibility of any good musician, tango or non-tango, will lead him or her to discover the sonoric possibilities of the resource.

VI. *Instrumental taboos and the relationship with the instrument.* Although this point will be discussed in another part of this document, the discomfort of changing the playing position, the perceived ugliness of the sound, the fear of damaging the instrument and, at a certain level, the taboo of disrespecting the instrument or the musical art by playing in “funny” ways, the taboo of desecrating the instrument by a corporal invasion of its space, may play a role in preventing a satisfactory result to be attained.

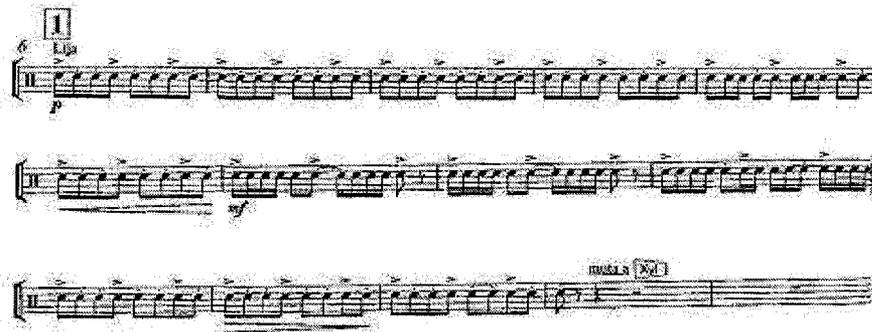
*Lija in the Symphonic Works of Astor Piazzolla*

By 1953, Piazzolla had in his catalog at least nineteen numbered works. He stated that all of his classical output as a composer was somehow “related to Buenos Aires, but always in a very intellectualized way.” In the list of works from that period that still received regular performances, his *Sinfonietta para orquesta de cámara*, op. 19 (1953) deserves a special place. This work was selected by the music critics of Buenos Aires as the best work of 1953, and was premiered under the baton of the famous French conductor and composer Jean Martinon in the Teatro Broadway.

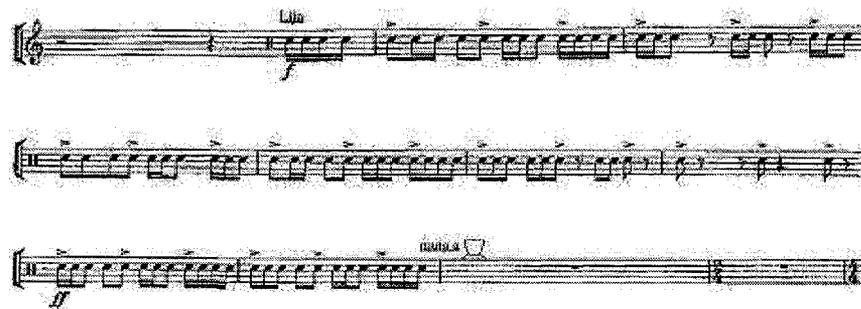
In the context of this “intellectualization” of Buenos Aires and its folk music, Piazzolla decided to include in his *Sinfonietta* a special percussion instrument called *lija*, which essentially was a little violin string laid between two violin bridges over a resonance box and equipped with a little bow. Why would the composer do such a thing (in fact, he commissioned this “mini-*lija* system” from a luthier especially for the occasion) when, one might assume, most of the violinists of the symphony orchestra were familiar with this technique or could have easily learned it? At that stage in the history of musical arts in Argentina, the barrier between the world of classical music (whose epicenter in Buenos Aires was the famous Teatro Colón), and the world of tango, deemed by many as an underworld of sorts, was considered insurmountable, not only by the audiences, but by both tango and classical musicians alike. It is very likely that the professional classical musicians of the orchestra would have refused to commit this profanation of the instrument in a style of playing that, in their view,

belonged in the brothels. Their fiery indignation would have been much more violent than the mild unwillingness of modern non-tango violinists.

So, what Piazzolla did was to turn to exoticism. He resignified the *lija* as an exotic percussion instrument. It is found in the first and third movements of the *Sinfonietta*. Here are some examples that show the evident link between these *lija* lines and the violin-*lija* lines:



Ex. 67 (from 1<sup>st</sup> movement)



Ex. 68 (from 3<sup>rd</sup> movement)

It should be pointed out that although Piazzolla did not come back to this instrument in his later symphonic compositions, neither did he alter the instrumentation of his *Sinfonietta* with a substitution for his *lija*, as he did with his *Tres Movimientos Tanguísticos Porteños* (1951) where he substituted the two

bandoneons called for by the original instrumentation. An examination of Piazzolla's percussion charts and usage of the percussion instruments in orchestral works like *Tangazo* (1970), *Aconcagua – Concierto para bandoneón* (1979) or the *Three tangos for solo bandoneón, string orchestra, piano, harp and percussion* (1980), show that the instrument he chose to fulfill the *lija* function in a symphonic context is the güiro, occasionally resorting to other instruments, such as the cymbal:

The image shows a musical score for Ex. 69, which is a percussion chart for the güiro. The score is written on a grand staff with multiple staves. The top staff is labeled '(güiro)' and contains a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. Below it are several other staves, likely for other percussion instruments, showing various rhythmic patterns and dynamics. The score is in 2/4 time and spans three measures.

Ex. 69 – *Tangazo* – mm. 85 – 87. Percussion: güiro

The image shows a musical score for Ex. 70, which is a percussion chart for the cymbal at the center. The score is written on a grand staff with multiple staves. The top staff is labeled 'Plata-centro' and contains a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. Below it are several other staves, likely for other percussion instruments, showing various rhythmic patterns and dynamics. The score is in 2/4 time and spans two measures.

Ex. 70. *Tangazo* – mm. 115 – 116. Percussion: cymbal at the center. (The manuscript contains the indication “escobillas” – “brushes”)

From another point of view, *lija*, as already said, translates into English as “sandpaper.” This may suggest that a substitution with sandpaper blocks would be appropriate. Such is the position of Gabriel Castagna<sup>121</sup> and other European conductors. Some conductors feel that the sonority of the *lija* is too invasive to the orchestral texture and find that the sandpaper blocks are a better option, particularly when the *lija* parts are very long, conceding that this line might also be played by the violin section, but not by a solo violin as a part of the percussion section. The problem underlying the discussion is aesthetical, and, once again, has to do with the concept of euphony in music. The inclusion of “noise” into the texture of Piazzolla’s tangos was both rooted in tradition and meant to be disruptive, revolutionary, “ugly.” It is perfectly logical, from the standpoint of the aesthetics of the traditional European symphonic orchestra, that sandpaper blocks are seen as the best option. Its sound does in fact blend smoothly, both with the orchestra as a whole and with the other percussion instruments. However, that is precisely the reason why my position is *against* its use as a substitution of the *lija*. Since Piazzolla did not reorchestrate those earlier works, the *lija* part should be played by a violin, not necessarily the concertmaster. Otherwise, a different combination of sonorities should be created in order to satisfy both aesthetical requirements: to keep the harsh, rough, even surly character of the *lija* and to make it an integral part of the orchestral sonority. For the second condition to be fulfilled, the articulation of the whole orchestra should be brought closer to tango standards. Otherwise, the roughness of the *lija* will

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<sup>121</sup>Young Argentine conductor, who released a very valuable album at the podium of the Württembergische Philharmonie Reutlingen, dedicated to Piazzolla’s symphonic music (Chandos CHSA 5006, 2003 year).

always be seen as *invasive* and *disruptive*. For purposes of illustration, one can compare this situation with the practice of using piano instead of harpsichord, and the omission of ornamentation and improvisation in some performances of Italian Baroque music; it is nowadays difficult to argue in favor of these substitutions in the name of euphony, when, in fact, the question is about stylistically relevant elements. If for some reason the realization of the *lija* by a string performer is an impossibility, then different percussion instruments, or combinations thereof, should be explored. A system that I have used in my own orchestrations of tango music might serve as a starting point of this exploration: the whole *lija* line is given to the sandpaper box (eventually combined with cymbals with brush), the maracas mark the accents of the R16 groups, and the güiro plays the *Tenuto* notes and the ensuing SaO. Here are the first measures of the Ex. 62 in this instrumentation:

The image shows a musical score for three percussion instruments: Güiro, Sand Block, and Maracas. The score is in 4/4 time and consists of four measures. The Güiro part features a melodic line with accents and tenuto marks. The Sand Block part provides a rhythmic accompaniment with a series of 'x' marks indicating specific sounds. The Maracas part consists of a simple rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents.

### Ex. 71 – Proposed instrumentation of Ex. 62

Certainly, this is one possible solution. As mentioned before, it is offered here as a reference for further exploration, which should include types of mallets and other specific techniques. The interpretative decision belongs entirely to the conductor, but the familiarity with these resources may help in dealing with tango

orchestrations in general, and even with Piazzolla's own scores. For example, in both available editions of *Tangazo*, the special effect in the first violins (indicated by the use of x-shaped noteheads) in measures 275 through 280 is unmarked. On the basis of all that has been explained, it is clear that the correct effect is *lija*, played by a solo violin. In a word, the conductor, having familiarized himself with the idiomatic origin and traditional usage of the *lija* effect, will have elements to shape the performance of the instrument (or instrumental group) that is performing the *lija* function, whether it is a solo violin, a complete string section, an isolated percussion instrument or a percussion ensemble.

### *Látigo*

*Látigo* – “whip” – consist of a brisk glissando upwards on the E string, usually ending on the B<sub>5</sub> natural harmonic, or, less frequently, on the E<sub>5</sub> or E<sub>6</sub> natural harmonic or some note of undetermined height.

### *Notation*

Note the way the *whip* is annotated in the following example:

(70)

The image shows a musical score for five staves, numbered 70 in a circle. The notation includes various dynamics and performance instructions. The top two staves (treble clef) have markings for *ff* and *gliss.* with arrows indicating glissando movements. The third staff (bass clef) has markings for *ff*, *div.*, and *gliss.*. The fourth staff (bass clef) has markings for *ff*, *univ.*, and *ff*. The bottom staff (bass clef) has markings for *pizz.* and *ff*. The score is written in 2/4 time and features complex rhythmic patterns and glissando effects.

**Ex. 72 - Tres Tangos para bandoneón y orquesta – no. 3 – mm. 70 – 73**

This notation could give the false impression that the glissando should start at the beginning of the first beat of bars 71 and 73, and extend for three beats. This way of playing would be against the very essence of the *whip* effect, which is one of a rupture of continuity. The normal practice of the *whip* would be better annotated this way:

The image shows two alternative notations for a glissando effect, separated by the word "or". Both notations are in treble clef and show a glissando starting on a note and moving upwards. The first notation has a *gliss.* marking above the staff and an *sf* marking below the staff. The second notation is identical but uses a different symbol for the glissando, possibly a vertical line with a 'V' above it.

**Ex. 73 – Alternative notation of m. 71 from Ex. 72**

Obviously, this notation is as descriptive as it gets. A tango musician would have no need of such a profusion of markings. However, when writing or arranging for classically trained musicians, especially for large ensembles, it is advisable to use such notation, including:

- Exact rhythmic location of the start of the upward glissando,
- Whether it should arrive on *one* or *two* notes,
- Exact rhythmic location of the start of the *crescendo* that normally precedes the *whip*, and
- Some kind of accent or accents that show that the arriving note, although of undetermined pitch, should be played both short and accented.

This additional notational effort will pay off with rehearsal time saved by explanations that actually could be provided on the score.

Another notational ambiguity of the *látigo* happens when it is found at the start of a composition. Although not annotated, the glissando should take a whole beat before the first beat. That is how Piazzolla and his quintet performed it in *Michelangelo 70*:

**A.**

**B.**

**Ex. 74 – *Michelangelo 70*, beginning. A) As annotated on the score. B) As played by Piazzolla and his Quintet.**

*Látigo* in the orchestral setting

Examples of *látigo* are abundant in Piazzolla's symphonic and chamber works and notoriously inconsistent in its notation.

A) Undetermined high note indicated:

Ex. 75 – *Tangazo* – mm. 69 – 70, violins and violas

B) Undetermined high note indicated, but the rhythmic departure point is not clear:

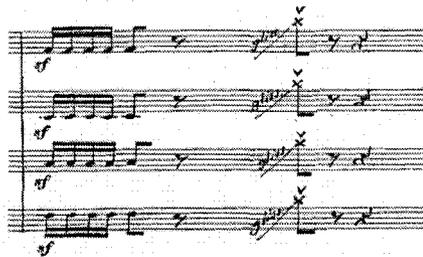
Ex. 76 – *Tangazo* – m. 183.

C) *Tangazo* m. 219, second violins:



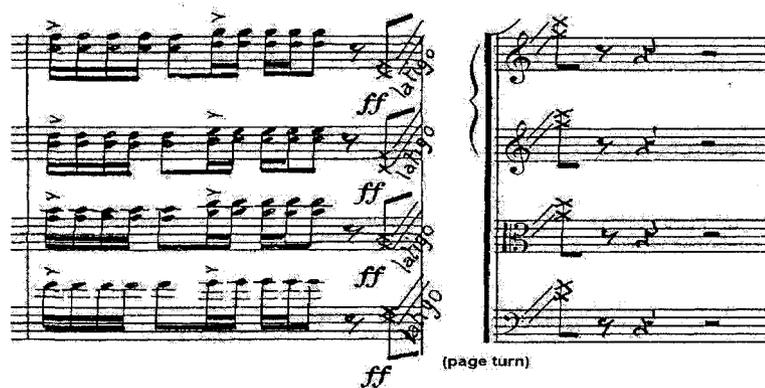
Ex. 77 - *Tangazo* – mm. 219 – 220. Second violins

D) The target note in the next example is represented by a relatively low register note (around G<sub>4</sub> for the violins.) The slide line is clarified by a “*gliss*” annotation the first time it appears:



Ex. 78 – *Tres Tangos para bandoneón y orquesta* – no. 1 – m. 41

E) Indicated in double stops. The starting points of the *látigo* are marked by notes of undetermined pitch, roughly corresponding to the middle register of the instrument. The name of the special effect is used, apparently for the first time:



Ex. 79 – *Tres Tangos para bandoneón y orquesta* – no. 1 – m. 56 – 57

F) Annotated with a “gliss” indication, “sf” and staccato signs:

The image shows a musical score for three string instruments: Violin 1 (Vn 1), Violin 2 (Vn 2), and Viola (Vla.). The score covers measures 18 to 21. Each staff contains musical notation with various annotations. The first staff (Vn 1) has annotations 'f', 'sf', and staccato signs. The second staff (Vn 2) has annotations 'f', 'sf', and staccato signs. The third staff (Vla.) has annotations 'f', 'sf', and staccato signs. The notation includes eighth and sixteenth notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

**Ex. 80 - Tres Tangos para bandoneón y orquesta – no. 3 – mm. 18 – 21**

G) *Concerto for bandoneón and orchestra* – First mov. – mm. 135 – 136.

Note the double slide line in Ex. 81 below, suggesting that the upward glissando should be executed on two strings, starting from the lower-register double stop “non divisi;” the undefined rhythmic starting point of the glissando; the total lack of notehead or indication of register for the target note, and the *crescendo* sign and the up-bow indication:

The image shows a musical score for four string instruments: Violin 1 (Vn 1), Violin 2 (Vn 2), Viola (Vla.), and Cello/Double Bass (Cb/Bs). The score shows four staves with various annotations. The first staff (Vn 1) has annotations 'No div.', 'gliss', and 'sfz'. The second staff (Vn 2) has annotations 'No div.', 'gliss', and 'sfz'. The third staff (Vla.) has annotations 'gliss', 'sfz', and 'v'. The fourth staff (Cb/Bs) has annotations 'gliss', 'sfz', and 'v'. The notation includes double lines indicating glissandos and up-bow/down-bow markings.

**Ex. 81 – *Concerto for bandoneón and orchestra* –  
1<sup>st</sup> mov. – mm. 135 – 136**

H) *Concerto for bandoneón and orchestra* – First mov. – mm. 197 – 198.

Note the use of the word *látigo* and, especially, the “°” sign over the target notes, indicating clearly that the target should be a natural harmonic, although graphically the position of the target notes does not correspond with that of the expected harmonic:

Ex. 82 - *Concerto for bandoneón and orchestra* –  
1<sup>st</sup> mov. – mm. 197 – 198

I) *Concerto for bandoneón and orchestra* – Third mov. – mm. 154 and

subsequent. Combined with the *tambor* effect (“drum”):

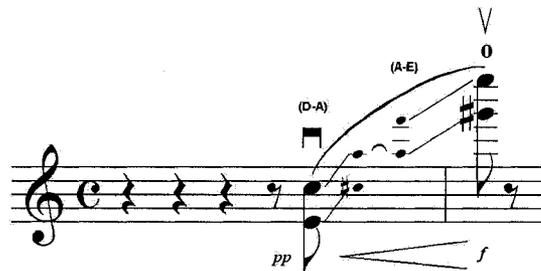
Ex. 83 - *Concerto for bandoneón and orchestra* –  
Third mov. – mm. 154 – 158

These examples should be enough to show how imprecise and changing the conventions employed by Piazzolla to annotate the *látigo* are in his orchestral works. From the point of view of the conductor, in order to ensure a satisfactory ensemble and the proper artistic effectiveness of the *látigo*, it is advisable to agree on the following points with the section or sections that play it:

1. *The initial approximate pitch of the starting point of látigo.* When there is no indication that the author meant a starting note within the middle register of the instrument (as in Examples 72 and 80), one should assume that the starting note would be around G<sub>4</sub> on the E string of the violin and the equivalent spots on viola and cello – in other words, any comfortable note in the first position on the highest string of the instrument. This should also apply to Example 82 as well, because of the character and tempo of the passage. The indication for a starting note in that example is more a rhythmic signal than an indication for instrumental register. As for Example 79, it is important to point out that the interval of the third, that the two notes of each section apparently form, is simply the result of the graphic layout and in no way should be considered as a mandatory interval to be kept throughout the *látigo*. The occurrence of *látigo* in this particular spot could be carried on at least in two different and contrasting manners, and the conductor might want to experiment with both of them before choosing one (the illustrations will be given for the violin parts):

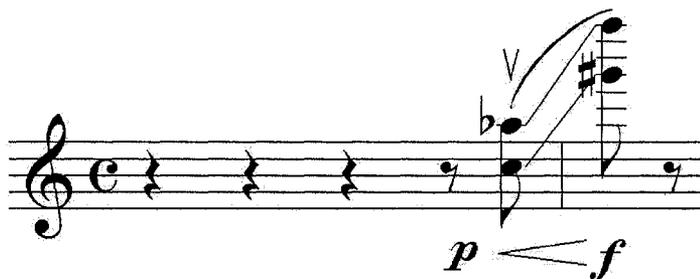
- a. *On different pairs of strings.* This *látigo* (Ex. 84) would start down-bow in the first position, on a minor sixth with first and second fingers. The glissando would be performed mostly on the central A and D strings, and, as it gains

momentum, the bow would merge to the E and A strings, ending the *látigo* up-bow on a minor sixth with the second and third fingers, its higher note being a natural harmonic in the highest register of the highest string.



Ex. 84

b. *On the same pair of strings.* In this case, the *látigo* (Ex. 85) would start with a minor sixth with second and third fingers up-bow, and continue until the third finger reaches a natural harmonic on the highest register.



Ex. 85

2. *The exact final pitch.* The *látigo* is a very sharp effect, and a good deal of its effectiveness comes from a clean, brilliant arrival on the top note. For the violins, the standard destination note would be the B<sub>5</sub> natural harmonic on the E string. The context might justify reaching up to E<sub>6</sub>. The conductor might want to experiment with both of them.

In any case, it is just as important that a destination note have been designated in advance as it is that the initial, starting pitch of *látigo*, unless annotated otherwise, be undefined. This goal is reached not only by having each section player choose freely a starting note, but also by starting the *látigo* at a true *piano* dynamic, with a rather diffused sound. Another important characteristic is that the upward glissando should speed up as the hand slides. This brings up a very common problem – the finger leaving the string before reaching the harmonic, because of the gained momentum. The solution is to instruct the section players to be careful that their finger (the one that aims at the harmonic) does not leave the string before the bow has executed the accent up-bow. This simple instruction has proven incredibly useful in cleaning the *látigo* effect in large string ensembles.

### *Tambor* (Drum)

#### *Description*

This effect is specific to the violin, although it can be performed on the viola and, with some limitations, on the cello. It consists of a special kind of pizzicato of undetermined pitch. In order to perform the *tambor* on the violin, the second and third fingers of the left hand should be placed on the D string in the third position, in the places corresponding roughly to the A and B flat. The nails of the second and third fingers have to be in contact with the G string without actually pushing it to the side in any way; in other words, the G string has to be free to vibrate. The pizzicato is performed on the G string. Due to the contact of the string with the

nails of the left hand, the resulting sound resembles the sound of a snare drum. Another important detail is that the pizzicato should be played by the right hand on the fingerboard slightly closer to the center of the string (i.e., the spot of the octave harmonic) than a normal pizzicato, since in order to produce this special effect, the player has to take maximal advantage of the flexibility of the string. This is the reason that the successful performance of the *tambor* on the viola depends highly on the kind of C string used – this effect works only with soft strings. The spot for the fingers of the right hand, measured from the bridge, should be thus approximately a third of the string's extension.

The most frequent occurrence of this effect is with a number of pre-beat grace notes. In order to perform the *tambor* with one grace note, the third and second fingers (not second and first) of the right hand have to be used in quick succession. To perform a two-note roll, the third, second and first fingers play in a row. This last type of roll can be considered the standard for *tambor*.<sup>122</sup> To perform it effectively, the fingers involved should be freed from the task of holding the bow (which will be held by the thumb against the palm); their tips should be aligned with the string, the upper articulation<sup>123</sup> relaxed. The fingers do a slight grasping motion in succession: third – second – first. This is complemented with a motion of the right hand to the right, driven in part by the wrist, and in part by a

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<sup>122</sup>I know of a tango violinist who is able to play a three-note roll, starting it with the fourth finger, but, except for this gifted colleague, I have never heard or seen anybody doing more than two grace notes.

<sup>123</sup>That means, the distal interphalangeal joints and the distal phalanges of the fingers that play pizzicato.

movement “en bloc” of the whole right forearm. The main accent falls on the last note, always played with the first finger.

#### *Notational conventions*

There are no specific conventions about the notation of *tambor*. In Piazzolla’s music, *tambor* parts are usually distinguished from *lija* by means of adding the word “*tambor*” or “*tamburo*” to the same x-shaped notes. However, *tambor* is often notated on the lower additional space. The problem arises when an orchestral violin section plays *divisi* different special effects. A useful solution is to use a different note-head to annotate *tambor*, for example, Maestro True Type font, character code 0xBF: 

#### *Problems and difficulties in learning to play tambor*

The problems usually found in the learning of the *tambor* are:

1) *The fingers of the left hand touch the G string with a part other than the nail.* The whole effect is based on the bouncing of the G string over the hard surface of the nails, so if the flesh of the fingers touches it, it actually muffles the pizzicato.

2) *The fingers of the left hand push the G string toward the left* (from the players point of view). If the fingers prevent the G string from vibrating freely, the snare drum effect does not take place.

3) *The fingers of the right hand are not aligned at the start.* Due to the different length of each finger, this makes the *tambor* almost impossible to play – one or more notes will be taken either too close to the string or too shallowly.



after the introductory solo by the double bass) includes the *tambor* effect on the violin.

3. As a part of some percussive rhythmic accompaniment texture, usually in a [332] meter:

The image shows a musical score for three violins (Violin A, Violin B, and Violin C) in 3/4 time. Violin A is labeled 'Tambor' and plays a rhythmic pattern of quarter notes. Violin B is labeled 'Lije' and plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. Violin C is labeled 'Pizz. behind the bridge' and plays a rhythmic pattern of quarter notes. The score consists of three measures of music.

**Ex. 87 – *Melancólico Buenos Aires* – beginning. Percussive accompaniment**

*Octaving – Octavado, also Ciríaco Octave*

It is noteworthy that in the Argentine bandoneón, unlike other double-reed bellow instruments, the paired reeds are tuned to a perfect octave. Due to this circumstance, whenever perfect octaves are played on the bandoneón, they tend to blend acoustically; hence, the effect known as “Ciríaco octaves,” in reference to the famous bandoneón player Ciríaco Ortiz, who is credited with the creation of this effect. It consists of supporting, or slightly delaying, some notes of the melody by means of taking them through a grace note an octave higher, usually creating a momentary bichord. The result is a sound masking that allows a blending between the two notes.

Piazzolla made ample use not only of this effect, but also of the reverse effect, which means supporting, preparing or reinforcing a note with its lower octave. This upward motion is usually accompanied by an increase in the air flow

toward the reeds, by means of a sudden opening of the bellows. This effect was particularly well suited for the emphatic, “cabrero” (Buenos Aires slang for “mean-tempered, belligerent”) style of Piazzolla, and became a distinctive feature of his playing. This idiom is widely found in the bandoneón parts of his compositions. Example 88, from the third of his *Tres Tangos para bandoneón y orquesta* deserves some analysis, since, besides its value as an illustration of this particular idiom, it allows us to once again approach a problem of musical notation, one that has consequences for other orchestral sections in this movement.



**Ex. 88 – *Tres Tangos para bandoneón y orquesta* – no. 3 – mm. 1 – 4**

Note the placement of the accent “>”. A ‘classical’ reading of this notation, one that would ignore the particularities of the bandoneón articulation, would lead to believe that the intention of the author was that the pick-up notes sound *louder* than the following quarters. However, the composer recorded this composition as a soloist on the bandoneón, with the Orchestra of St. Luke’s, under the baton of Lalo Schifrin,<sup>124</sup> and his rendition of this passage could be descriptively annotated in this way:

<sup>124</sup>Elektra/Nonesuch 79174-2, studio recording, 1988.



Ex. 89

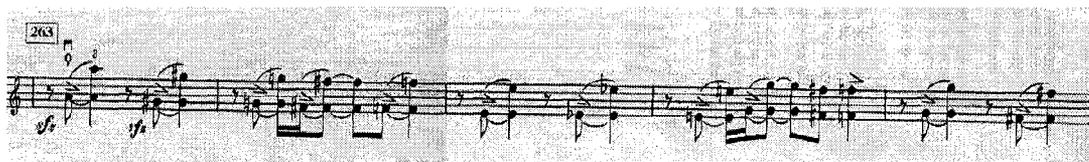
The written accent does not actually have any other function other than to catch the attention of the soloist, in order for him to be prepared to sustain that note and to support the following upper-octave note by means of the acoustical blending and bellow stretching that was previously discussed.

It was said that this example, and the divergence between notation and performance, have consequences for other instrumental sections of this work.

Indeed, the same motive is found in the violins and viola:

Ex. 90

Before proposing the manner in which, in my opinion, this passage would be delivered in a way closer to the actual intention of the composer and more effectively, the reader should note the fact that this type of articulation (the upward *Ciriaco octave*) belongs to the group of inter-instrumental idiomatic borrowings. Piazzolla makes an insistent, almost obsessive use of it in the final thirty-four bars of his *Le Grand Tango* for violoncello and piano:



**Ex. 91 – *Le Grand Tango* – mm. 263 – 267. Solo cello part.**

The use in *Le Grand Tango* of an actual octave double-stop, which has a thicker sonority than the bare upper note, shows that Piazzolla was very aware of the best way of reproducing this effect on a stringed instrument. Possibly, a concern about intonation and the technical difficulty of playing octaves led him to write the *octavado* for orchestra in the way he did in Example 90. But when put in the right context, the articulation intended by the author for this passage comes out with all clarity. Therefore, if the conductor is confident enough in the technical abilities of his violin and viola sections, an effective suggested rendering of this passage would be this:

**Ex. 92**

with the explicit indication of increasing the bow speed in the moment the octave is taken. This technique can also be described in subjective terms, suggesting that the bow and the left hand should build up tension on the eighth note, as if something was restraining them, and then they are set free on the quarter note. This description very much parallels what actually happens when the bandoneón plays the *octavado*; it also has the advantage of describing the musical character of this effect.

Should the execution of the octave pose an intonation problem, the same realization is possible resorting to “divisi:”

The musical score consists of three staves. The first staff is in treble clef, the second in middle clef, and the third in bass clef. The music is written in 3/4 time. The first measure is marked 'divisi' and contains eighth notes with dynamic markings '< f3'. The second measure is marked 'unisono' and contains quarter notes with dynamic markings '< f3'. The third measure is marked 'divisi' and contains quarter notes with dynamic markings '< f3'. There are also 'unisono' markings above the notes in the third measure. The notes are primarily eighth and quarter notes, with some slurs and accents.

### Ex. 93

Once again, it is important to underscore the incomplete character<sup>125</sup> of Piazzolla's scores – his musical writing relies on unwritten traditions, conventions and practices. The true interpreter should thus try to play the sound that the

<sup>125</sup>“Incomplete” from the point of view of classical music and its framework, of course.

composer intended, not necessarily what the composer wrote. The performers of Piazzolla's music are, in a way, luckier than the performers of Renaissance and Baroque music, since the traditions that encompass and explain tango musical notation are still very much alive. These traditions, plus the recordings by Piazzolla on the bandoneón, not only justify these kinds of improvements to the score, but also make them totally necessary for its stylistically truthful rendition.

### Other Special Tango Effects

Apart from the special effects discussed so far, there are a number of effects found less frequently that are still relevant to the performance of Astor Piazzolla's works. On a general note, it should be observed that all of the instruments were exploited for their percussive possibilities. Therefore, unless there is something technically or musically relevant to it, the effects resulting from just knocking on the instruments are not mentioned. As for the remaining special effects, here is a catalogue – ordered by instrument – and a brief description of each.

#### *Violin*

##### *1) Sirena (siren)*

An unspecified note on the high register of the D, A or both strings is reached with a fast, light glissando, and immediately starts a very slow glissando downward. This effect sounds like a ghostly siren on a phantom urban

landscape. A variety of *siren* is often found in which the descending glissando is played *tremolo*.

### 2) *Bajada* (down slide)

This is similar to the *látigo* (whip) but inverted. A double stop (or a single note) of undetermined height is taken 'forte' on the E or E and A strings. A fast *glissando* down starts immediately. It is important to start the down slide on the exact beat where it is marked. A very characteristic rhythmic formula for the *bajada* is shown in the example below:



**Ex. 94**

### 3) *Knocks on the body of the instrument*

The name is self-explanatory. One or two fingers of the left hand knock lightly but incisively on the upper right part of the instrument's top. It was employed in some improvisatory percussive sections by Piazzolla's violinists in his works. Piazzolla indicated an equivalent effect for the cello, which he called *thumb*, in his string quartet *Four for Tango*, although in the context in which the *thumb* is used, it is clearly intended to imitate the double bass knocks. Modern tango violinists combine it with *liza* in [332] meter, creating a pattern that serves as a rhythmic commentary to introduction or transitional sections:



### Ex. 95 – *Knock* and *lija* combination

#### 4) *Anillo* (ring)

In the third movement of his *Concierto para Quinteto*, Piazzolla indicates an effect called *anillo* (ring) which implies knocking the scroll of the violin with a finger of the left hand with a ring on it. The resulting sound is surprisingly sharp and powerful.

#### 5) *Pizzicato behind the bridge*

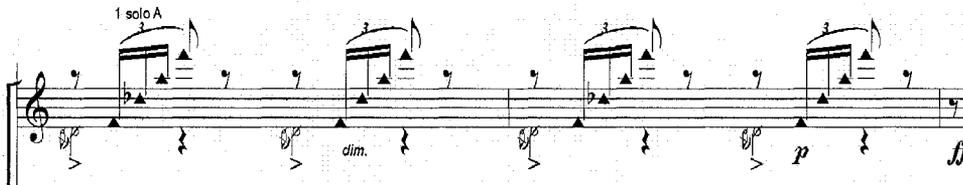
Sometimes strange pizzicato effects are heard in the middle of percussive textures in Piazzolla's recordings. This kind of pizzicato was not found annotated anywhere in Piazzolla's music but, evidently, the pizzicati behind the bridge were part of some of his violinists' improvisations. This effect works well in an amplified setting. In a concert hall without amplification, though, it is almost inaudible.

Whenever it is necessary to employ it, the substitution of these notes with normal pizzicati on the extreme high register of the A string of the violin is suggested.

There is no standard notation for this effect. The practice to which I adhere is to use triangle-shaped noteheads written on the pitches corresponding to the open strings (Ex. 96) or, when the abovementioned substitution is intended, the approximate height of the note is annotated:



**Ex. 96 – Verano Porteño – beginning**



**Ex. 97 – Otoño Porteño – coda**

#### 6) "Guitarrita" (little guitar)

This effect should be more associated with the traditional and old tango rather than with the Piazzollean "Nuevo Tango," since it is an expression of a more optimistic, festive mood than the darker spirit of later tango. It is mentioned here because *guitarrita* is a part of the tango *yeites* and, technically, it is essentially the same thing as the *tambor*, but in the upper register of the instrument. Applying the succession of pizzicati to single notes, chords or the upper three strings of the violin, the resulting sound resembles guitar arpeggios.

#### *Double Bass*

##### 1) *Strappata*

This is a particular kind of percussive effect, obtained when a strong *ricochet* bow stroke on the open strings of the double bass is briskly stopped with an energetic slap of the open left hand on the lower part of the fingerboard. This

effect is employed in moderate tempos, often in *yumba* textures, and usually – although not always – in combination with slaps on the body of the instrument (see next section). The standard notation for this effect is a quarter-note with a three-note roll, all written with x-shaped noteheads, under the indication *strappata* or *strappato*:



**Ex. 98 – Double Bass *Strappata* standard notation.**

## 2) Slaps: Side (upper rib) and Bottom (back)

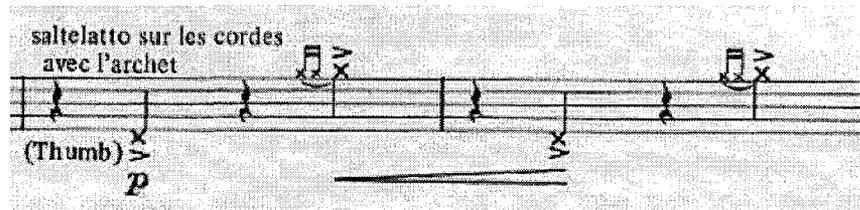
The double bass allows basically two types of knocking, or, more exactly, slapping, since these percussive effects are executed with the open palm of the left hand. One is the slap on the back of the instrument, with a grand cassa-like resonance; the other is the slap on the upper rib, of a higher pitched, more wooden quality. These slaps combine in the form of four-beat formulas either with notes or with *strappata*. Here are some examples of this combination:



**Ex. 99 – Some combinations of double bass percussive effects**

The previously mentioned *thumb* effect for the cello, combined with *saltelato sur les cordes avec l'archet* (saltelato on the strings with the bow), obviously

meaning *ricochet*, is a clear paraphrase of this double bass typical pattern, which Piazzolla employed in the percussive closing section of *Four for Tango*:



Ex. 100 – *Four for Tango* – cello part – mm. 179 – 180

### *Piano*

Due to the fact that the contact between the pianist and the actual source of sound within the piano is not directly established, except through the complex mechanism of the keyboard, the possibilities for special acoustical effects, apart from knocking or slapping, are less than on stringed instruments. However, it is worth mentioning the touching of the piano strings in *Buenos Aires Hora Cero* and a number of other compositions that include sections of aleatoric percussive improvisation.

### *Bandoneón*

Aside from what can be considered idiomatic manner of performance on the bandoneón, Piazzolla used to practice a sort of "strumming of the buttons" on the bandoneón, which, thanks to the use of amplification, vaguely resembled the sound of maracas. Beating on the box of the bandoneón results in a sound very similar to that of temple blocks, and can be successfully substituted in orchestral arrangements.

## CHAPTER VI

## SUMMARY

*El tango es un pensamiento triste que se baila.*  
Enrique Santos Discépolo<sup>126</sup>

When we choose a specific course, we exclude thousands of other courses of action that might have been undertaken. These virtual universes, made of things that could have been, are sometimes so vast that our actions and accomplishments seem tiny by comparison. Writing this dissertation, such as it is, implied not to undertake the writing of a vast number of dissertations that might have been brought to life, for example, on the Afro-Argentinean and Afro-Uruguayan elements in Nuevo Tango, on the creative conflict of post-Piazzollean Argentine tango composers, or on Piazzolla's role in shaping our modern ideas about classical, ethnic, pop and folk music and musical crossover. A massive book could have been written just on the relationship between famous classical soloists, chamber ensembles and conductors with Piazzolla and his music, or, finally, on the link between Piazzolla's musical revolution and the new techno-tango movement. These subjects, alas, will have to await their dedicated scholar, or find their place in another time in my life. This dissertation was written with two main goals in mind: First, to open the access to the most authentic core of Astor Piazzolla's orchestral works for the classical musicians – especially the conductors – that admire and enjoy them, and second, to provide practical and

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<sup>126</sup>Translation: *The tango is a sad thought that is danced.* **Enrique Santos Discépolo** (a.k.a. Discepolín) (1901 – 1951) was a poet, composer and actor, author of the lyrics of famous tangos performed by some of the most important singers of his time, amongst them notably Carlos Gardel.

analytical tools to help bridge the gulf between musical cultures. In doing so, a vast amount of purely empirical knowledge had to be processed, synthesized and formulated (possibly for the first time in the history of tango studies) in systematically coherent terms. More specifically, it was done in terms that would be useful to a conductor in a rehearsal situation, as well as to any other performer moved by a sincere interest in Piazzolla's works and *Nuevo Tango*.

Certainly, it is not this dissertation's purpose to set a rigid, dogmatic standard for "New Tango authenticity." The information contained in this document, regardless of its possible value toward developing an updated musical theoretical apparatus for the discussion and analysis of Piazzolla's work, is intended chiefly for practical artistic use, and its hermeneutic elements exist for the sole purpose of guiding the artistic intuition of the interpreters – a spiritual quality that no amount of study can replace.

Finally, by introducing the reader to the diversity and complexity of the artistic and cultural aspects that surround Piazzolla's world, the author's intention was to attract the interest of scholars and performers alike toward this *living* artistic and cultural phenomenon. This work is meant to encourage an active inquiry of this field through interaction with performers and scholars connected to this world through both their *praxis* and cultural membership– an inquiry that would combine not only elements of musicology, music history, ethnomusicology, but also literature, cultural studies and performance practice studies. It is my hope that this document will contribute to this end.

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