



# Fingerprints of Style: Astor Piazzolla

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28<sup>th</sup> August 2021

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# Overview

## Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992)

- Training
- Influences
- Nuevo Tango
- Fingerprints of style

## Playlist

[https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3CslFuewQ02vcq9liw3eU5?si=WsxE176\\_RCq6MONsYtWjqQ](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3CslFuewQ02vcq9liw3eU5?si=WsxE176_RCq6MONsYtWjqQ)

# Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992)



# Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992)

- Studied Classical music as a child, transcribing Bach for Bandoneon
- Played in Tango orchestras after his family returned to Argentina from New York in 1936
- Studied composition with Ginastera in Buenos Aires from 1942
- Wins a French government grant to study in Paris for a year with Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979) in 1954

# Epiphany

“Nadia looked into my eyes and asked me to play one of my tangos at the piano. So I confessed to her that I played the bandoneon; I told her she shouldn’t expect a good piano player because I wasn’t. She insisted, “It doesn’t matter, Astor, play your tango.” And I started out with “Triunfal”. When I finished, Nadia took my hands in hers and with that English of hers, so sweet, she said, “Astor, this is beautiful. I like it a lot. Here is the true Piazzolla – do not ever leave him.” It was the great revelation of my musical life.”

Gorin: *Astor Piazzolla: a memoir*, p. 71

# Nuevo Tango

Piazzolla developed the Tango Nuevo style from his particular cocktail of influences, the strongest accents in the style are from:

- Traditional Argentinian Tango
- Blues
- Bach
- Stravinsky
- Bartók
- Ravel

## Historical and Cultural Contexts of Nuevo Tango

- At the turn of the twentieth century, Argentina experienced mass immigration due to the potential economic progress of the country.
- Between 1869 and 1914, the nation increased its total population by seven million, and Buenos Aires went from 180,000 to 1.5 million inhabitants.
- Like Piazzolla's grandparents, who immigrated from the cities of Trani and Lucca, Italy, the new inhabitants during this period came primarily from Spain and Italy.

## Historical and Cultural Contexts of Nuevo Tango

- In effect, the immigrants redefined the identity of a porteño (a person living in the capital port city).

“[Immigration] allowed for the spontaneous integration of cultural traditions and the emergence of hybrid cultural expressions of great creativity, such as the tango ... in which creole influences and the diverse contributions of the immigrants came together.”

Luis Alberto Romero

# The Milonga

- This genre originated as a song form (milonga canción) and reflected the melancholic life of the gaucho and later the compadrito. The milonga canción is often a slow song with a descending melodic theme in a minor key.
- A faster version of the Milonga was the *milonga bailando*

Milonga rhythm in 2/4



# So, what is a tango?

- The exact origins of the tango are unknown and regularly disputed by scholars.
- This controversy is due in part to the variety of art forms that took place in the cosmopolitan Río de la Plata region at the end of the nineteenth century. Both the song genre (tango canción) and the dance genre (tango bailando) coexisted along with forms of the older siblings, the milonga, candombe, and habanera.

# So, what is a tango?

- It is clear, however, that tango is a fusion of immigrant musical forms, and during its primal stages, was associated with the compadrito.
- Scholars agree that performances took place in bordellos (brothels) of the early arrabales in Buenos Aires (and Montevideo) and represented sexual as well as taboo themes associated with this underground world.

# Histoire du Tango

- By the turn of the twentieth century, the tango spread from the arrabales to the City Centre and became an enduring part of popular culture in Buenos Aires.
- Three stages in the development of the tango:
  - 1) guardia vieja (Old Guard), 1890-1917
  - 2) guardia nueva (New Guard), 1917-1955
  - 3) nuevo tango (New Tango), 1955-present

# 1) guardia vieja (Old Guard), 1890-1917

- “El choclo” (Corn) (1905) by Ángel Villoldo
- “La cumparsita” (The Little Masked Parade) (1917)  
by Gerardo Matos Rodríguez

## 2) guardia nueva (New Guard), 1917-1955

- Tango became the cultural icon of Buenos Aires during the 1920s.
- All members of society enjoyed it as a dance and as a musical art form in salones de baile (upper-class dance halls), milongas (dance halls), and cabarets, as well as in cafés, bars, silent-movie theatres, and on the radio.
- “Por una cabeza” (By a Head) by Carlos Gardel (1935)

# Emotional content

- *Tristeza* sadness caused by unhappy or unrequited love affairs
- *Mufarse* to mope or be upset and to willingly surrender to one's suffering
  - As Julie Taylor notes: “[*Mufarse*] is the entire complex of actions and emotions involved in sitting alone at a table with a drink, sipping it slowly while contemplating the totality of one's misfortunes and underlying basic bad luck, and enjoying oneself.”
- *Nostalgia* looking back on happier times, often tied in with the notion of a homeland that has been left, but to which one might return

# The descending melodic line

- “Mi Buenos Aires querido” – Carlos Gardel (1934)



# The tresillo – a 3-part rhythm, 3+3+2

Milonga rhythm in 2/4



Tresillo rhythm in 2/4



Tresillo in 2/4 simplified



Milonga rhythm in 4/4



Tresillo rhythm in 4/4



Tresillo in 4/4 simplified



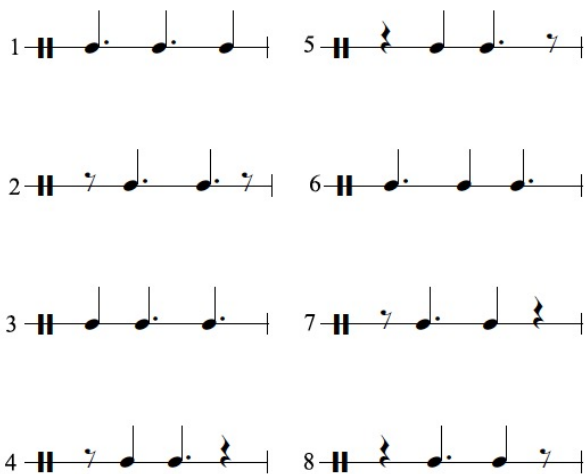
Rhythmic cells paired together - 1 3 3 3 3 3



Marcato technique with arrastre



# The tresillo – with possible shifts



# Percussive gestures - violin

- Lija (sandpaper) or *chicharra* the violinist plays on the D string, behind the bridge with the bow at the frog
- Golpe (knock) the left hand is in fifth position with the thumb behind the neck, and the middle finger of the left hand strikes the body of the violin.
- Látigo (whip) playing a fast ascending glissando on the E string with an upbow
- Perro (dog) playing a fast descending glissando on the A string with a downbow
- Tambor (snare drum) the violinist places the middle finger of the left hand between the G and D string. The right hand then plucks the G string approximately one fourth of the way up the fingerboard from the tailpiece. This creates a very *secco* (dry) *pizzicato*.

# Percussive gestures - bass

- Strappato                      bassists hit the strings with the bow, similar to *col legno* before the downbeat, stop the sound on the strings with the left hand on the downbeat, and hit the back of the instrument with the left hand on beat two.
- Bombo                          Golpe on the bass

### 3) nuevo tango (New Tango), 1955-present

- More dissonant harmony
- Contrapuntal writing
- More complex textures
- Tango band – bandoneon, violin, guitar, piano, double bass

# The Bandoneon



# The Bandoneon

**Contemporary 142 voice  
Bandoneón Fingering Chart**  
© 2007 Ben Bogart  
[www.benbogart.com](http://www.benbogart.com)

**Opening  
Abriendo**

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**Closing  
Cerrando**

The chart displays 142 fingerings for the bandoneon, organized into two main sections: 'Opening Abriendo' (top) and 'Closing Cerrando' (bottom). Each fingering is represented by a circle containing a note name and a finger number. The notes are arranged in a circular pattern, with the central circle containing the notes 'Opening Abriendo' and 'Closing Cerrando'.

At the bottom of the chart, there is a musical staff showing a sequence of notes and fingerings, likely representing a specific musical exercise or piece. The staff includes a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#).

# Piazzolla's Style in three examples

- Fugata (1969)
- Soledad (1988)
- Libertango (1974)

# ‘Fugata’ (1969)

- Fugue subject – Am, Dm, Gm, Cm



# Melodic descents in Fugata



# Harmonic descents in 'Fugata' 1'53"

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled 'Fugata' (1'53"). The score is written in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It features a complex texture with multiple voices and a prominent harmonic descent in the bass line.

**First System:**

- Chords:** G, F# F E | Eb D Db C | B Bb A G# | G F# F E
- Bass Line:** C: D, Eb, D, Db, C, B

**Second System:**

- Chords:** E: DD alt, D, D alt
- Bass Line:** ③, ②, ②

**Third System:**

- Chords:** ①
- Bass Line:** ①

The score includes various musical notations such as treble and bass staves, notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The harmonic descent is a key feature, moving from G down to E in the first system, and from D down to E in the second system.

# 'Soledad' (1988) 2'45"

Chromatically descending harmony



musical score for 'Soledad' (1988) 2'45", featuring chromatically descending harmony. The score is written for guitar (gtr), piano (pno), and bass (cb).

The key signature is D major (three sharps: F#, C#, G#). The time signature is 4/4.

The score is divided into two systems, each with a guitar staff, a piano staff, and a bass staff.

**System 1:**

- Guitar (gtr):** Melodic line with notes corresponding to the harmony. Includes fret numbers (8, 5, 7, 9, 3, b5, #9, 3, #5, 7) and a bar line at measure 2.
- Piano (pno):** Accompanying chords and arpeggiated figures.
- Bass (cb):** Bass line.

**System 2:**

- Guitar (gtr):** Melodic line with notes corresponding to the harmony. Includes a bar line at measure 2.
- Piano (pno):** Accompanying chords and arpeggiated figures.
- Bass (cb):** Bass line.

**Harmony (Chords):**

System 1: Bm/D, D<sup>13</sup>, D<sup>b13</sup>/G, C<sup>13</sup>, B<sup>13</sup>/F, B<sup>b13</sup>, A<sup>13</sup>/E<sup>b</sup>

System 2: A<sup>b13</sup>, G<sup>13</sup>/D<sup>b</sup>, F#m, Fm, C/E, B/D#, Bm/D, C#(#5), C#, F#m

# ‘Soledad’ (1988) 3’15”

Chromatically descending harmony over a pedal for modulation

The musical score is written for three staves in 4/4 time, with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The top staff is marked *8va* and contains sustained chords that descend chromatically from F#m to Ebm. The middle staff features a melodic line with a chromatic descent, accompanied by the same descending chords. The bottom staff provides a steady bass line, consisting of a continuous eighth-note pattern. The overall effect is a smooth modulation achieved through chromatic harmony over a constant pedal point.

8va

F#m Fm Em Ebm

# ‘Libertango’ (1974) 3’00”



# Libertango

**P**  $\gamma$  tresillo no 7

Am B<sup>7</sup>/A Dm<sup>6</sup>/A Am

x2 x2 x2 x2

tresillo no 1

$\underset{\sim}{t}$   $\underset{\sim}{7}$   $\underset{\sim}{6}$   $\underset{\sim}{t}$

The image displays a musical score for the piece 'Libertango'. It consists of two staves: a treble staff for the piano (P) and a bass staff for the guitar (G). The piano part features a series of eighth-note triplets, each marked with an accent (>) and a 'x2' box indicating a repeat. The guitar part provides a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth notes and rests, also marked with accents. Chords are indicated above the piano staff: Am, B<sup>7</sup>/A, Dm<sup>6</sup>/A, and Am. The guitar part includes specific fretting instructions:  $\underset{\sim}{t}$  (natural),  $\underset{\sim}{7}$  (7th fret),  $\underset{\sim}{6}$  (6th fret), and  $\underset{\sim}{t}$  (natural). Two boxes at the top contain 'tresillo no 7' and 'tresillo no 1', showing the rhythmic patterns for these triplets. The piano part begins with a 'P' and a 'gamma' symbol, and the guitar part begins with a 'G' and a 'gamma' symbol.

# Libertango

The image displays a musical score for the piece "Libertango". It consists of three staves. The top staff is in treble clef and contains the "main melody" and a "complementary melody". The middle staff is in bass clef and features a "pending bass line" and a "descending bass line". The bottom staff is also in bass clef and contains a "descending bass line". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and ornaments. Specific annotations include "mordent" and "parallel 5ths".

main melody

complementary melody

mordent

pending bass line

mordent

parallel 5ths

descending bass line

# Libertango 1'20"

Circle of 5ths as a II, V, I sequence

The image shows a musical staff in 4/4 time, illustrating a sequence of chords and their corresponding Roman numerals. The sequence is as follows:

- Chord 1:**  $E_m^{7b5}/Bb$  (labeled  $Dm: II$  below)
- Chord 2:**  $A^7$  (labeled  $V$  below)
- Chord 3:**  $Dm$  (labeled  $I$  below)
- Chord 4:**  $Dm^{7b5}/Ab$  (labeled  $C: II$  below)
- Chord 5:**  $G^7$  (labeled  $V$  below)
- Chord 6:**  $C$  (labeled  $I$  below)
- Chord 7:**  $E^7/B$  (labeled  $I$  below)

The notation shows the melodic lines for each chord, with the final chord  $E^7/B$  being a passing chord.

# Performance Practice?

- Emotional Expression
- Sound quality
- Colour
- Timing and Rubato
- Improvisation

# Conclusions and Summary

## Nuevo Tango

- Traditional Argentinian Tango      format and emotional content
- Blues      improvisation and emotion
- Bach      counterpoint
- Stravinsky and Bartók      rhythm
- Ravel      harmony

# Questions?

## References

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- Drago, Alejandro *Instrumental Tango Idioms in the Symphonic Works and Orchestral Arrangements of Astor Piazzolla. Performance and Notational Problems: A Conductor's Perspective* ( DMA, University of Southern Mississippi, 2008)