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Melancholy in Music and Migration:
The Development of the Tango as a Transcultural Art Form

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The intense rhythms and melancholic melodies of the tango have created a well-known genre to listeners around the world, who recognize the music as both exotic and familiar. Although inextricably linked to Argentina, and specifically to its capital, Buenos Aires, the tango has dispersed throughout the world to the point where it is globally identifiable. This paper will examine how the tango formed and developed into a global sensation, contextualizing the music both within its complex historical and migratory patterns, as well as transcultural and globalist discourse. It will additionally present analysis of several pieces that are representative of the changes in musical style over the past century and elaborate on the composers that contributed to the tango’s transnational dissemination.

One must understand several terms related to cultural migration in order to discuss the dispersion of tango music and its musicians. Multiculturality is defined as two or more cultures coexisting in the same space, although they may not actually interact (Marotta 2014). Transculturality consists of a “cultural hybrid which interconnects and integrates various cultural forms” (Marotta 2014). The transcultural subject additionally implies a process of acculturation, which involves the elimination of aspects of the previous culture in favor of traits of the new one. Finally, interculturalit is an active interaction, or dynamic multiculturality, between two distinct cultures (Berrios 2016). The tango encompasses these concepts perfectly: “the dance was a ritual of encounter, the blend of different callings, a reunion of immigrants and natives, of social classes, of men and women” (Varela 2005, 66; “la danza era el ritual del encuentro, la mezcla de vocaciones tan dispares, una reunión de inmigrantes y nativos, de clases sociales, de hombres y mujeres,” translation mine). Intercultural interactions in multicultural spaces gave birth to the tango, but the music developed and expanded as a genre due to transcultural processes.
The hybridity of tango music aligns with Ana María Ochoa’s theory of the sonic transculturation that is inherent in Latin American music of the twentieth century. Ochoa explains that many musical genres in Latin America are linked to specific places and histories that further ascribe to a musician’s deep sense of identity (2006, 805). Even if the musics are received at a transnational level, she claims that they can be rediscovered and redeveloped to both distinguish themselves from and align themselves with the mass music of the Western world (808). This constant process of redevelopment, or rehybridization, has continued to give folkloric and popular genres such as the tango a new sense of value and increase their circulation around the globe.

The people that created the tango belong to several distinct transnational people groups that have encouraged the formation of transnational and globalized musical genres. Ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino divides these cultural formations into immigrant groups, diaspora, and cosmopolitan cultural formations. Immigrant communities maintain ties to their homeland most strongly during the first generation, but they eventually assimilate into their new home and dissolve into the dominant culture (Turino 2003, 59). Diaspora maintain the cultural heritage and practices of their homeland for generations while concurrently embracing cultural practices of their new home,形成ing themselves as a distinct social group within the larger society (60). Finally, Turino posits that cosmopolitan formations consist of small pockets of locals in a given society that identify more strongly with individuality and placelessness than their home (61). These people “are defined not by immigrant status but rather by the major adoption of cosmopolitan lifeways and habits of thought” (Turino 2008, 118). The cosmopolitan tango musicians of the early twentieth century were thoroughly rooted in the porteño culture of Buenos Aires, but they had a further sense of universalism and placelessness that gave them both
the yearning and the determination to disseminate their music on a global level. Furthermore, the technological advances of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries gave composers the ability to spread the tango through recordings, radio, film, and live concerts, simultaneously metamorphosing the sound to engage younger and increasingly cosmopolitan audiences.

Although Latin America and the Caribbean share a common history of colonization, slavery, independence, and the consolidation of nation-states, each country’s history has its own nuances that distinguish one from another. Argentina is no exception. After the Spaniard Pedro de Mendoza founded Buenos Aires in 1536, the town remained small and the country relatively unpopulated for several centuries. The indigenous Mapuche population resided on the pampas, or plains, and further south toward Patagonia, while the iconic gauchos, immigrants similar to the cowboys of the American Wild West, roamed the region as cowhands (Collier et al. 1995, 19). After Argentina gained its independence in 1816, their leader (in Spanish caudillo) Juan Manuel de Rosas maintained a strict conservative rule for almost fifty more years, significantly limiting the development of the nation.

In 1861 the nation solidified into a unified state under the rule of Bartolomé Mitre. The construction of a new port in Buenos Aires in 1870 provided the infrastructure for increased trade and immigration, and a decade later Buenos Aires was made the federal capital (Miller 2014, 11). That same year, president Julio Argentino Roca expelled the Mapuches from the pampas and began selling the land to thousands of European immigrants, including Italians, Spaniards, and French. These immigrant groups raised cattle for beef and cultivated the land for grain. This agricultural innovation, along with the construction of the railroad and the growth of the European-style capital, caused the 1880’s to be known as the “age of prosperity” (Azzi 2000, 4). The large influx of European immigrants created a dramatic increase in the country’s
population, altering the overall demographics and culture into a predominantly European one (Collier et al 1995, 21). In Buenos Aires, this meant there were more immigrants than native-born people, further transforming the society and overall structure of the port city (35).

Besides the ethnic groups mentioned above, there was a small but significant African diaspora that lived around Buenos Aires and across the Río de la Plata in Montevideo, Uruguay. Argentina’s beef and grain economy, which was originally a product of the slave trade, required significantly fewer slaves than plantation-driven sectors such as Brazil and the Caribbean region (Andrews 1980, 24). The majority of the Afro-Argentines came directly from Africa or via Brazil, bringing with them their cultural and musical traditions (27). The freed slaves in the late 1800s became practically invisible on the margins of an increasingly white society; despite this, they contributed greatly to the development of tango music.

The African diaspora in the mid to late 1800s played a genre of dance music called the *candombe*. This music would turn into a cultural phenomenon that brought the Afro-Argentines together, providing them both recreation and self-identification as a distinct social group within the larger society. Drums drove this multi-stage communal dance, which resulted from a blending of national dances of various African countries. Due to the European influence in Argentina, during the 1850s and 1860s the Afro-Argentines began to incorporate European dance styles such as the waltz, polka, and mazurka into their *candombes*, marking the beginning of the intercultural interactions that would lead to the tango (Andrews 1980, 160-5).

Meanwhile, as the Italian immigrants bought the farmland of the pampas from the government, they forced the gauchos to move to Buenos Aires to find work (Brill 2011, 352). They settled on the fringes of the burgeoning capital, where the turbid origins of the tango began. Buenos Aires consisted of gentrified *barrios*, or neighborhoods, surrounding the center of the
city (Collier et al. 1995, 34). This meant that all of the marginalized groups struggled on the edges of the city in the arrabales, which were the poor, unstructured outskirts that connected the city to the agricultural industries in the countryside. These groups included the displaced gauchos, now called compadres, and diaspora of lower class such as the Afro-Argentines (Miller 2014, 11). The arrabales quickly became sites for the cattle slaughterhouses and the brothels that provided the habitants with sources of work and pleasure.

Musical genres that gauchos and European immigrant populations in the arrabales would have played during the 1880s and 1890s include the aforementioned waltz, polka, mazurka, along with the habanera and contradanza, originating from countries such as Poland, Spain, and Cuba. These genres were couples’ dances whose choreographies and rhythms influenced the hybridization of the tango. In fact, the milonga, a predecessor of the tango, was called “the poor man’s habanera,” and originated across the Río de la Plata in Montevideo (Collier et al. 1995, 186). The milonga most greatly influenced early tangos’ syncopated rhythms and metric organization. According to some legends, in these decades the Afro-Argentines danced a version of the candombe, which they called a tango, and the compadres took this dance and musical style and incorporated it into the milonga (44). Since the Afro-Argentines were already dancing to European music, this two-sided appropriation allowed for even more musical hybridization and the eventual birth of the tango.

Throughout its inception, the tango belonged strictly to the streets of the underbelly of society, being performed only by members of the lowest class. Therefore, the tango directly reflected the tragic fates of those living on the margins of society: desolation, pain, and melancholy (Varela 2005, 66). Similar to the origin stories of other popular musics such as jazz and Cuban son, to dance the tango was completely unacceptable for the members of high society
Musicians played the first tangos on instruments that were available to them, such as the guitar, flute, and clarinet. These musicians, lacking classical training, improvised tango melodies in brothels and cafés to be danced by prostitutes and their clients (Collier et al. 1995, 46). By the turn of the century, tango trios began playing in cafés solely for listening pleasure. The “Italianization of tango” began as the genre made its way to the dance halls and ballrooms of the middle class, and professional composers, musicians, and dancers began writing and performing tango (50). The formative period during which the tango developed its basic sound and spread throughout Buenos Aires is known as the Guardia Vieja. It is in this time that some of the most famous standards were composed, including “La cumparsita,” “El choclo,” and “La morocha.” Composers also wrote the pieces for publication as sheet music, calling them *tangos criollos para piano* (Collier et al. 1995, 57; “creole tangos for the piano”).

A defining characteristic of the tango is its lyrics, which portray a variety of themes related to the melancholic life of the immigrant communities struggling to survive. These themes include lost love, abandonment, betrayal, vengeance killings, nostalgia, the culture of the arrabales, oblivion, and displacement and immigration, among others (Collier 1986, 162-3). Enrique Santos Discépolo is considered one of the most famous lyricists of early tangos, composing across a variety of lyrical genres contextualized within the common man’s quotidian life (Varela 2005, 152). He stated, “the tango is a sorrowful thought that is danced,” further implanting the ideas of sadness and loss on the music (Collier 1986, 160; “el tango es un pensamiento triste que se baile,” translation mine). Tango singer Eladia Blázquez juxtaposed this view, asserting, “the tango is the life that is sung,” showing that within a single genre there is
both life and death, while simultaneously questioning meaning in life and song (Horvath 2006, 21; “el tango es la vida que se canta,” translation mine).

Another important defining aspect of tango lyrics is the presence of the *lunfardo* language. *Lunfardo* is “a popular vocabulary born of the encounters between immigrants and *criollos* in the *conventillos* and suburbs of the city” (Miller 2014, 40). It is a form of street Spanish that incorporates words from Italian, Polish, Quechua, French, and other languages, as well as other linguistic phenomena such as inverting syllables within words. Composers would frequently incorporate *lunfardo* words into their verses, sometimes to the point that other Spanish speakers would not easily understand the lyrics.

While the lyrics define the tango within its historical and societal context, the music further establishes the style of the genre, especially in regard to its three recognizable accompaniment patterns. The most common rhythmic accompaniment in the *Guardia Vieja* was also the rhythm used in the *milonga* (see Figure 1). By 1910, two other important rhythms were incorporated: the *marcato* and the *síncopa*. For the marcato, the “accompaniment articulates all four downbeats in a 4/4 measure,” either with equal emphasis or with accents on beats one and three. The *síncopa* rhythm is displayed in Figure 2 (Miller 2014, 205). The rhythm of the accompaniment is of utmost importance, and is typically played precisely and in a slightly accented, separated style.

![Figure 1](image1.png) ![Figure 2](image2.png)
The piece “El choclo” is exemplary of both the musical form and the lyrics of early tangos. A collaboration between the aforementioned lyricist Enrique Discépolo and the famous composer Ángel Villoldo, it was written in 1903 and dedicated to a pimp who worked in the same zone that Villoldo sang his tangos (Varela 2005, 61). The piece has subsequently been recorded by countless tango orchestras and singers and is one of the most recognizable melodies in tango music. The analysis provided is based upon a tango criollo para piano that is readily available in the public domain (Villoldo). Villoldo wrote this work in three distinct sections, the standard ABC form of the Guardia Vieja, with an additional brief introduction. The A section is written in minor, with the B and C sections in major, and each transition includes a key change as well.

The left hand accompanies the melody of the right hand using the earliest accompaniment pattern that mimicked the milongas, as well as the marcato pattern. The melody is also representative of the tango: “usually no more than 1 or 2 measures in length, motives are used as a fundamental unit of melodic development in tango.” The motives combine in a sequence of imitative or contrasting motives to create the balanced phrases in the melody (Miller 2014, 122). These characteristics can be examined in Figure 3 below, which shows a portion of the A section. “El choclo” is written in 2/4, which is again a standard of the early tangos, although they eventually changed to be written in 4/4.

Figure 3
The lyrics of “El choclo” reveal important aspects of the culture of the melancholic life in Buenos Aires at the turn of the century. The title, *El choclo*, means “the corn kernel,” coming from the Quechua word for “corn,” demonstrating the intercultural linguistic elements from the beginning. It further functions as a euphemism for sex, showing the influence of the brothels in the composition of early tangos.

Con este tango que es burlón y compadrito
se ató dos alas la ambición de mi suburbio;
con este tango nació el tango, y como un grito
salió del sórdido barrial buscando el cielo;
conjuro extrañó de un amor hecho cadencia
que abrió caminos sin más ley que la esperanza,
mezcla de rabia, de dolor, de fe, de ausencia
llorando en la inocencia de un ritmo juguetón.

(With this tango, that is joking and arrogant,
is tied two wings the ambition of my slum;
with this tango was born tango, and like a shout
left the poor district searching for heaven;
strange spell of a love made by rhythm
which opened paths of no more law than hope,
mix of fury, of pain, of faith, of loneliness,
crying in the innocence of a playful rhythm.)

The first verse and its translation above mention several key thematic elements, including the *arrabal* culture, love, loneliness, and the tango itself (Villoldo; translation mine). The only *lunfardo* word used in the first verse is *compadrito*, referencing the arrogant, young, and playful boys who roamed the streets of the *arrabales* (Collier et al. 1995). Several *lunfardo* words are used in subsequent verses, such as *paica* and *grela* (*lover/woman*), *canyengue* (*dance*), *carancanfunfa* (*type of dance*), and *bacán* (*pimp*) (todotango.com, no date). Lastly, the lyrics contain the use of *vos*, the familiar form of “you” that is pervasive in Argentine language.
Overall, while the musical elements are easily understandable, it takes considerable work for even a Spanish speaker to decipher the lyrics of “El Choclo.”

Even as Buenos Aires became an increasingly cosmopolitan city, admiring and imitating all European trends, the elite continued to reject the local tango as their own music. Tango, however, was on its way to France and the rest of Western modern society. In 1907, Ángel Villoldo, along with another tanguero, Alfredo Gobbi, went to Paris to record some of their tangos, and it was danced in Paris for the first time in 1908. Around the same time, the use of classical exoticism, such as in Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes and Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring, along with jazz and other dance forms from the United States, gave citizens an increased intrigue in foreign art practices (Collier et al. 1995, 69). Back in Buenos Aires, young men from higher social classes were becoming progressively familiar with the tango because of their encounters with it in brothels or cafés (72). These elite Argentinians would often visit Paris in the summers, bringing with them aspects of their culture, which would eventually include the tango.

Scholars consider 1912 as the official year the tango arrived to Paris. The vacationing Argentine Ricardo Güiraldes and his friends were in a salon, and “guests were asked to sing the song or perform the dance which best represented the culture of a particular country.” They played the Afro-Argentine tango “El entrerriano” and danced, and the French loved it. The tango seeped into all upper social classes of France, contributing to the “dance craze” that spread throughout the country in the summer of 1913 (Collier et al. 1995, 72). The dance in Europe transformed into a more elegant ballroom dance so that high society would more readily accept it. Fashion changed to accommodate the dance style, and the word “tango” was even incorporated into other facets of culture, including food, poetry, and paintings (74).
Because France was a global cultural center at the time, the tango began to spread throughout Europe, to countries such as Germany, Russia, and Italy, and to the United States. In 1913 a British magazine called *The Sketch* used the tango as its October cover story, stating, “Everybody’s doing the tango, learning the tango, talking the tango, watching the tango.” The New York Times similarly reported, “All New York Now Madly Whirling in the Tango.” Political leaders such as the Britain’s Queen Mary and the Spanish princess Isabel de Borbón further legitimized the music to be socially acceptable for all classes (Collier et al. 1995, 81-91).

Despite the overall legitimization of the tango, there was considerable stigma, especially among the religious leaders. Due to its overt sexuality, Comtesse Mélanie de Burtalesis of France questioned, “Is one supposed to dance it standing up?” Others, including the Catholic Church in France and New York, called the dance “offensive to morals,” “the worst of a whole series of wild and shameless modern dances,” “a bastard, miscegenated progeny of Europe and the Americas,” and “a couple of Arabs under the influence of opium” (Collier et al. 1995, 76-97).

This moral controversy, however, was not enough to stop the tango craze from returning to Buenos Aires, a city that people were calling the “Paris of Latin America” due to the locals’ attempts to mimic French trends (Miller 2014, 4). European high society had validated the tango as an acceptable art form, so Argentinians felt as if they could safely embrace it as well (Collier et al. 1995, 61). When the tango returned to Buenos Aires, it looked sexually tamer than when it had left, further contributing to its favorable social reception (97). Additionally, by 1913 Baron Antonio de Marchi, the son-in-law of the former president Julio Argentino Roca, was planning tango events and festivals in Buenos Aires. Similarly to Paris, social class barriers disintegrated on the dance floor: elite men danced with lower class women because the skill of the dance was more important than their social standing (116).
This acceptance, along with the populist and nationalist movements in the 1920s, led to the formation of the tango as the ideal Argentinian art form (Brill 2011, 358). Songwriters increasingly composed tangos, and poets such as Argentine Jorge Luis Borges and Chilean Pablo Neruda mentioned the music in their works, further authenticating it as a “central tenet of local cultural identity” (Miller 2014, 9). The period of legitimization and dispersion through the rest of society occurred during the later years of the Guardia Vieja, and at this time a growing number of professional musicians and groups called orquestas típicas began to perform nightly in cabarets and theaters of the middle class. The tango additionally became associated with the porteño culture, which is the distinct culture of the habitants of the Buenos Aires (porteño literally means “of the port”). While the traditional danced tango was first to become a popular, national music, the rise of the tango canción was what propelled the genre into admiration from the rest of Latin America.

The tango singer Carlos Gardel is regarded as “Latin America’s first (and in many ways greatest) superstar of light entertainment in the twentieth century” as well as the “best-known Spanish American film star in the 1930s” (Collier 1986, xi). A supposed migrant himself with a murky past, some historians claim that he was born in France in 1890 as Charles Romauld Gardes, although Uruguay and Argentina also both claim him as their own (4). Gardel’s childhood in Buenos Aires exposed him both to the operas of the elite, as well as the songs of the lower-class payadores, or folk singers (Collier et al. 1995, 123). He began his career as a singer by performing folk songs in a duo with Uruguayan José Razzano, establishing a reputation for himself in Buenos Aires and the Southern Cone region (Collier 1986, 27). The rise of the tango canción, or tango song, began one evening in 1917, when Gardel sang Pascual Contursi’s “Mi
noche triste.” This night is considered a “decisive moment in the history of South American popular music,” when the *tango canción* was born (61).

After the creation of the *tango canción*, Gardel began to tour on a transnational level, further spreading a different style of tango music to the global audience. Razzano claimed, “he was as restless as a migratory bird; he needed new horizons” (133). Gardel’s cosmopolitan feelings of placelessness propelled him to perform in Uruguay, Spain, and France, while his combination of hard work and talent enabled him to reach a high level of fame (Collier et al. 1995, 124). During the 1930s, he moved to New York City to work on films with Paramount Pictures (Collier 1986, 215). The films are plot driven but contain several of the tangos that would become his most famous, including “El día que me quieras,” “Volver” and “Por una cabeza.” Being on the big screen enabled Spanish-speaking audiences to recognize his face and his voice, further transforming him into a legend.

After his last film, *Tango Bar*, Gardel went on tour in Latin America, going to Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and Colombia. While flying out of Medellín on June 24, 1935, his plane collided with another one on the runway and exploded, tragically killing both him and his lyricist Alfredo Le Pera (Collier et al. 1995, 125). Tributes rang throughout Buenos Aires and Uruguay, exclaiming, “Silence. Carlos Gardel is dead.” Similar to many other musicians who have died too young, his untimely death converted him into a legend. Argentines now claim that the “hero will never die; ‘Gardel,’ they say, ‘sings better every day’” (125). This mythical man reached audiences across the Americas with his music and movies, establishing for himself a face and a voice that they will never forget.

The *tango canción* selected for analysis is “Por una cabeza,” by Carlos Gardel with lyrics by Alfredo Le Pera. Gardel wrote this piece in 1935 for his final Paramount film, *Tango Bar*...
The movie tells the story of a man who leaves Buenos Aires because he lost a bet on a horse race. In the song, he compares lost love to losing this horse race by a small margin, or by only a head of a horse.

The *tango canción* is stylistically different from the tangos of the *Guardia Vieja* in several ways. In popular music of this time period, the voice was the most important part of the piece, making the accompaniment the support and background to the soloist (Collier 1986, xiii). The voice uses vocal slides and *rubato*, or stylistic stretches and accelerations, while the accompaniment stays in strict rhythm. Additionally, the accompaniment is more polished and smooth (Moore 2012, 297). The accompaniment consists of a string orchestra, piano, and background singers, which is typical of Gardel’s works in the 1930’s (Collier et al. 1995, 123). The form of the *tango canción* typically consists of two equal sections that balance each other. Frequently, one of the sections is in minor mode, and the other is in major (Moore 2012, 298).

The vocal melody of “Por una cabeza” is constructed similarly to “El choclo” in that short motives are contrasted or imitated to develop the melodic four-bar phrases. Additionally, stylistic performance practices of the tango indicate that the singer would slide between notes, such as the half notes “ca-beza” and “lo-curas”. In this arrangement for voice and piano, based on the original Gardel recording, the piano accompanies using the marcato style, although the *síncopa* rhythm is occasionally employed at the end of phrases. The right hand in the piano plays the strings’ melodies, creating a smooth, lyrical contrast to the strict marcato downbeats of the left hand. These traits can be seen in the beginning of the B section, which is portrayed in Figure 4.
The lyrics of “Por una cabeza” center solidly around the anguish of lost love, comparing it to losing bets in another important aspect of Argentine culture, the horse races. There are fewer lunfardo references in the work, perhaps because Gardel wrote it for a more international audience than just the Argentinians. Besides using vos instead of tú, the only lunfardo word is metejón, which means “intense passion” (todotango.com, no date). Below are the lyrics and translation of the B section of the work, which further elaborate on the pain, grief, and almost suicidal tendencies of the singer.

Por una cabeza, todas las locuras
su boca que besa
borra la tristeza, calma la amargura
Por una cabeza, si ella me olvida
que importa perderme
mil veces la vida, para que vivir?

(By a head, all the madness
her mouth that kisses
removes the sadness, calms the grief
By a head, if she forgets me
what does it matter if I lose
my life a thousand times
for what do I live?)
(todotango.com, no date; translation mine)

At this time Buenos Aires was undergoing some other changes that would further alter tango history. Despite the military coup in Argentina and the depression in the United States that
had repercussions throughout the world, Buenos Aires underwent a renovation in the 1930s that led to the Golden Age of tango, which lasted until the end of the 1950s (Collier et al. 1995, 145). These were the years when the tango was “popular music in the broadest sense of the term,” meaning that it was played and listened to by members of all facets of society (Miller 2014, 202). The iconic tango sound further developed in these years with the arrival of the bandoneón to Buenos Aires. The bandoneón was an immigrant itself, a product of Germany and a cousin of the accordion. In contrast to the accordion, it was comprised of two complicated button keyboards, making it extremely difficult to play. Furthermore, accordion was associated with happy, lighthearted pieces, contrasting with the bandoneón’s melancholic and nostalgic timbre, which lent itself perfectly to the tragic melodies and lyrics of the tango (Denniston).

The orquestas típicas, or traditional orchestras, at this time were divided into traditional and evolutionary groups. The evolutionary band was the smaller of the two, consisting of a sextet of two bandoneónes, two violins, a string bass, and a piano. The traditionalists added three to four more bandoneónes and/or violins (Collier et al. 1995, 120). The main difference in the groups, however, was how they were played. The traditional orchestras focused on playing highly rhythmic music, and their goal was to create music that was danceable. The evolutionary orchestras, on the other hand, composed their music for increased listening pleasure through the use of more advanced melodies and harmonies (119). Traditional composers included Roberto Firpo and Francisco Canaro, while the evolutionary included Julio de Caro, Osvaldo Fresedo, and Pedro Maffia. The most famous evolutionary composer, however, and the transformer of the tango into the Nuevo tango, was Astor Piazzolla.

Astor Piazzolla was born on March 11, 1921, in Mar del Plata, an ocean town south of Buenos Aires. His family was comprised of descendants of the aforementioned “age of
prosperity,” as all four of his Italian grandparents emigrated in the late 1800s. In 1925, he and his parents migrated to the Lower East Side of Manhattan, a historically Italian and Jewish area. In search for a better life in New York, Astor’s family paradoxically lived a poor life, surrounded by grief, violence, and the nostalgia for their homeland Argentina. Despite this, young Astor thrived on the streets, joining a gang and quickly learning English to the point that it was better than his Spanish. When Astor was eight years old, his father gave him a bandoneón to help him become a musician (Azzi 2000).

With the bandoneón, Astor began taking lessons, but did not enjoy it much at first. Eventually the family moved back to Mar del Plata, and after he grew up, as well as after several moves back and forth between the New York and Mar del Plata, he decided to migrate to Buenos Aires to pursue his career in music. Piazzolla began desiring to be a classical composer, taking piano lessons with the renowned composer Alberto Ginastera, while concurrently studying modern nationalist composers such as Bartok and Stravinsky and listening to jazz (Azzi 2000, 29). By night Piazzolla would make a living playing bandoneón in cabarets and performing in orquestas típicas such as those led by the legend Osvaldo Pugliese. During his time playing with these orchestras, he became dissatisfied with the traditionalist style and, desiring to make the music more interesting, began composing his own arrangements (Azzi).

Around the same time Piazzolla began experimenting with tango music, he won a prize for a classical composition that won him a scholarship to study in France. There he studied under Nadia Boulanger, the famous pedagogue who also taught composers such as Aaron Copland and Philip Glass. She told him that his classical compositions lacked feeling, but when he played her his tango “Triunfal” she said, “This is Piazzolla. Don’t ever leave it” (Azzi 2000, 51). This pivotal moment led to his return to Buenos Aires and the beginning of the Nuevo tango, or new
tango. Subsequently, Piazzolla created several orchestras, moved back and forth between Argentina and France, and toured in places such as Europe, North America, and Japan. The original goal of his first octet was to take it abroad – he wanted to raise the quality of the tango and “conquer the mass public” (Azzi 2000, 213). He stated, “My dream is to impose my music, my country’s music, all over the world” (Azzi 2000, 167). In this way he can be considered the Gershwin of Argentina, because he took the national music and developed it into a highly sophisticated genre that bled over into the art music world (Azzi 2000, 164).

This did not occur without some contention: the traditionalists were upset that he would dare to take an established, emblematic national genre and alter it almost beyond recognition. Which was understandable, of course – this transcultural blending meant that old techniques were replaced with new ones, ones from sources outside of the traditional Argentine culture. Furthermore, Piazzolla stripped the tango of the dance and the lyrics, the aspects that gave birth to the music, and only played music for listening purposes (Varela 2005, 111). Piazzolla was truly cosmopolitan in the sense that he looked to the world for his inspiration and audience, but because he was able to remain rooted in the language of the tango, he provided the art world with a style that is immediately recognizable as both his own music and the music of Argentina.

Piazzolla’s *Nuevo tango* music is immediately distinguishable from earlier styles of tango music due to its hybridity with other styles of music. The harmonic progressions are heavily influenced by classical and jazz music and the rhythms reminiscent of his love for Bartok and Stravinsky (Azzi 2000, 150). A disciple of Bach, Piazzolla employed canons, ground bass techniques, and fugues frequently, simultaneously combining these with many modern twentieth century compositional techniques such as polyrhythms, polytonalities, dissonance, atonal effects, and impressionism (158). Furthermore, he sought a more contemporary sound through his
instrumentation, even including an electric guitar in one of his later ensembles. One of the most recognizable traits of Piazzolla’s music is his rhythmic motifs: his accompaniments are ubiquitously embedded with a three plus three plus two pattern, shown in Figure five.

Figure 5

The Piazzolla piece chosen for analysis is “Primavera Porteña,” the first movement of his four-work cycle Las cuatro estaciones porteñas. This cycle, whose title is influenced by Vivaldi’s The Four Seasons, depicts the sounds and emotions of the four seasons in Buenos Aires. “Primavera Porteña,” written in 1970, is representative of Piazzolla’s music in both style and form. As previously stated, Piazzolla’s music and the Nuevo Tango are remarkably different from traditional tango music. The format of the piece is ABA, where the A section has a heavy rhythmic emphasis and thrust, and the B section is slower with greater focus on the melodic line. The A section of the work is essentially a four-chord song, focused around minor and diminished chords. The chords, however, include numerous dissonances and jazz influences such as 9ths and 11ths. Piazzolla wrote the original version of this piece for his quintet, which included the bandoneón, violin, piano, electric guitar, and bass (piazzolla.org). In the arrangement below (for clarinet, bassoon, and piano), the clarinet retains the melody throughout most of the piece. The bassoon begins with the marcato accompaniment pattern but then changes to melodic and counter-melodic components. In fact, Piazzolla utilizes chromatic counterpoint between the two soloists, such as in Figure 6.
Figure 6 further portrays the rhythmic and melodic motives that Piazzolla used to construct the tango. The piano plays the melody at this point, which centers around syncopated arpeggios on the accented 3+3+2 rhythm. The entire A section is carefully marked with accents to further articulate the primal, Stravinsky-inspired rhythms. In contrast, the B section begins with the bassoon singing a long, sweeping melody, while the piano plays a much calmer marcato accompaniment. As the clarinet takes over the melody (Figure 7), the piano continues with the marcato, additionally playing chromatic sixteenths on beat four, a popular convention of *Nuevo Tango* music. The jazz-inflected rhythms of the B section continue to be played in syncopated rhythms (Herrerías).
Within Argentina in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Golden Age of tango, along with the cabarets and cafés, drew to a close. As the immigrant communities assimilated into the national society, the tango was no longer needed to bring marginalized groups together. Furthermore, socialist artists were beginning the *Nueva Canción* folk music movement to prompt a new sense of nationalism. Even so, Argentina and its culture had entered global awareness by the 1980s, due to Astor Piazzolla’s music, Argentina’s powerhouse economy, the stories of the dictatorship and *los desaparecidos* headlining newspapers, and the exile presence in countries such as France and Mexico. Although tango has yet to reach its level of popular fame that it once had, this globalism, along with the successful dissemination of Piazzolla’s music in the high arts, induced the use of tango elements in art compositions of the Western world.

Western composers used their local training and techniques to write classical versions of the globalized tango during the latter half of the twentieth century. This includes works such as Pierre Dubois’ “Sonatine-tango,” written for bassoon in 1984, and Ricky Ian Gordon’s 1995 art song “Coyotes.” These composers were from other countries outside of Argentina, further demonstrating the tango’s reach to an international audience. Because of technological advances in the recording industry and the rise of other popular genres such as jazz and rock, composers in the Western world were more aware of world music traditions, and subsequently used these styles as influences for their music. However, “despite all this blurring and blending, many musicians adhere[d] to their own traditions, and for them the lines between traditions [had] not collapsed” (Burkholder et. al 2014, 966). While classical composers did not lose their traditions, this transcultural hybrid of art and popular music meant that acculturation occurred for the popular styles. For the pieces analyzed, this meant that the parts of the music that are identifiably
tango are primarily the rhythm and the harmonies. The composers used art music techniques for the form and instrumentation, and the melodies are hybrids of both tango and art music.

One example of a composer using tango in his art music is Pierre Max Dubois, who was a French composer that studied with Darius Milhaud at the Paris Conservatory. He primarily produced instrumental works with influences from Milhaud, Prokofiev, jazz, and folk genres, ignoring the modern compositional trends of the 1970s and 1980s such as electronic music and spectralism (Musk, 2001). “Sonatine-tango,” written in 1984, is one of three pieces Dubois wrote for bassoon. This short, intense work consists of four movements. The element of tango that is most easily recognizable is the rhythm: the piano uses the forte marcato rhythm pattern in 4/4 meter, with the pick-up eighth notes reinforcing the emphasis of the downbeats. The harmonies in the piano reflect jazz and the Nuevo tango movement, using chromaticism, 7ths, and 9ths to make the harmonies more sophisticated. The bassoon’s melody is filled with accents, syncopations, emphasis of the 3+3+2 pattern, and mordents to further imitate the tango music. These elements can be seen in Figure 8.

![Figure 8](image)

Dubois uses several classical music techniques to keep the music strictly in the art music world. First of all, the piece is written for bassoon, which is an instrument not associated with
popular threads of tango music. The range and overall technical difficulty for the bassoon is an additional trait of art music of the late twentieth century. The melody soars up to high D#s and Es repeatedly, with rapid runs and arpeggios that further its complexity. In contrast to other tango melodies examined, which were based on symmetrical phrases and motives, this melody is through-composed. Finally, the dynamics, while overall staying in the fortissimo range, occasionally drop down to pianissimo to add drama and tension to the movement.

Ricky Ian Gordon composed the art song tango “Coyotes” in 1995 for medium-high voice and piano, and it is included in his art song collection *A Horse with Wings*. A resident of New York City, Gordon composes primarily vocal works in the styles of art song, opera, and musical theater (*Ricky Ian Gordon*). His works are demanding for both the singer and the pianist, while the lyrics and music provide the audience with musical, moving songs. Similarly to “Sonatine-tango,” “Coyotes” is distinguished as a tango by its rhythm in the piano accompaniment (although he also marks it as a tango at the beginning of the score). The rhythm and meter in “Coyotes,” is the one of early tangos, shown in the bass line of Figure 9.

![Figure 9](image)

Although the chords in Figure 9 include 7ths, and the passage requires some dexterity, the piano introduction and subsequent interludes include longer runs and highly chromatic
chords that characterize the piece as art music, despite the inherent tango rhythms. The soprano’s melody is highly chromatic and has a large range with leaps, including that shown in Figure 9. Gordon used an American poem for the lyrics, further demonstrating the transition of this genre to the Western, English-speaking world. The lyrics, while they speak of love and “hungering for kisses” like traditional tango lyrics, in the end say, “no man may own my soul/from off this frozen knoll.” This reflects a shift from the woman feeling anguish and pain over a lost love to feeling content in her solitary life, changing the thematic message of the tango (Gordon).

As Western composers used their classical training to fuse other genres with tango music, many tango musicians and composers continued Piazzolla’s Nuevo tango tradition. For example, Mario Herrerías’ piece “Niebla y cemento,” written in 1993 for flute, bassoon, and piano, is a challenging Nuevo tango work that further evolves Piazzolla’s methods (Goranson 2008, 45). This piece, written for a non-standard ensemble for tango music, is filled with highly chromatic chords and arpeggios, and the only rhythmic evidence of it being a tango is the 3+3+2 pattern. The meter changes frequently and includes mixed meters, such as in Figure 10.

While the tango had successfully migrated to the art world, it was continually referenced in late twentieth century global culture, and specifically the culture in the United States. Tango
had additionally retained its enthusiastic followers into the end of the twentieth century. During the month of the fiftieth anniversary of Gardel’s death, there were commemorative acts all around Latin America (Collier 1986, 291). The tango since has been performed all over the world, in places as far removed from Argentina as the Czech Republic, Japan, and Finland, becoming a cultural symbol as both a high class dance and a folk dance (Collier et al. 1995, 193). Books such as Ramón Pelinski’s *El Tango Nómade* further detail the deterritorialized, transcultural tango practices present around the world (2000). Prominent musicians such as Paquito D’Rivera and the Kronos Quartet have performed the genre and verbally validated its value in the art world (Azzi 2000, 252). Cellist Yo-Yo Ma even claims that Piazzolla’s “Le Grand Tango” is one of his “favorite pieces of music… [with] inextricable rhythmic sense… total freedom, passion, ecstasy” (Azzi 2000, 229).

One sector of culture that reinforced the tango in the global scene was the film industry. One of the first appearances of tango in Hollywood was in the 1921 silent film *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, where the famous Latin lover Rudolph Valentino dances a tango. Since then, countless actors have danced the tango in film, from Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard* and Marlon Brando in *The Last Tango in Paris* to Richard Gere in *The Cotton Club* and Arnold Schwarzenegger in *True Lies*. Tango references have carried over into the twenty-first century as well, such as in *Moulin Rouge*’s “Tango de Roxanne” and the conversion of Gardel’s tango “Volver” to flamenco for the Spanish film *Volver*.

Continuing into the twenty-first century, the music of the porteños has transformed to adapt to a technological society and to cement itself as an Argentinian cultural symbol. In 2011, the United States Postal Service “included Gardel in a stamp series commemorating the Latin Music legends along with” musicians such as Tito Puente and Celia Cruz (Miller 2014, 15). The
United Nations also declared the tango as a UNESCO intangible cultural heritage in 2009. Composers such as the Gotan Project and Bajofondo have combined the tango sound with electronic sounds and influences of rock, hip-hop, and even cumbia to redefine the genre and explore its boundaries while targeting younger listeners (Miller 2014, 23). The leader of Bajofondo, Gustavo Santaolalla, continues to straddle the art and popular music worlds, composing scores for films and shows such as Motorcycle Diaries and Jane the Virgin in conjunction with innovating new tango sounds. Tango in recent years has further assimilated with the jazz world, such as the Nuevo tango artist Pablo Ziegler, who won the 2018 Grammy for the best Latin jazz album Jazz Tango.

What does all this mean for the future of tango music? The overwhelming conclusion is that it is not going anywhere. Chilean folk musician and composer María Carolina López believes that tango will be the next genre to be folklorized in her country, though it will take some time because of how strong Argentina’s presence is in the genre (López, 2016). Orchestras, wind ensembles, and other performing groups continue to perform tango music at concerts both in Latin America and around the globe. Piazzolla reflects this idea, claiming, “I have an expectation: that my work will be listened to in 2020. And in 3000 too. At times I am sure of it, because the music I make is different… I am going to have a place in history, like Gardel” (Azzi 2000, 273). And right now, just two short years from 2020, this quote is ringing true, carrying with it the lyrics of the Gardel’s tango “La canción de Buenos Aires:” “born in the suburbs, today it reigns throughout all the world” (todotango.com, no date; “nacido en el suburbio, que hoy reina en todo el mundo;” translation mine). Continually reflecting the struggles of the melancholic inhabitants of the world, one can only wait with anticipation for what will come next of this migratory music, the tango.
References


Collier, Simon, et. al. 1995. *¡Tango! The Dance, the Song, the Story*. London: Thomas & Hudson.


