

1 | A Brief History of Tango

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The history of tango spans over a century and is the story of music, dance, and poetry. It was born as a close-embrace dance with complex figures, some charged with eroticism, and improvised performance. The music that became exclusively associated with this dance was based on the *habanera* rhythm. It incorporated elements from Africa that remain present, although at times hidden, in tango's DNA. Tango lyrics were initially influenced by Spanish theater, but they took their own developmental path to reach new heights as popular poetry by the 1940s. Originally from the Río de la Plata region in Argentina and Uruguay, tango, as a multidimensional art form, has risen to great fame and has expanded throughout the world; yet through its history, it has had pinnacles of splendor and low ebb moments. Tango has even taken root outside of its region of origin and become a local form of music in some places, such as in Paris in the 1920s. Since then, tango has come back to Argentina from these foreign places and has been filled with influences that have changed how it is played or danced. The present-day tango is not the same music, dance, and poetry from a century ago, but indeed its essence has been preserved in many guises. This brief account traces tango's musical, choreographic, and poetic changes from its origins in the nineteenth century to today.

Origins and Early Tango

Instrumental Music to the 1920s and the Guardia Vieja (Old Guard)

Tango, as music, originated in the late nineteenth century in the cities of Buenos Aires and Montevideo, the capitals of Argentina and Uruguay, respectively, on the banks of the Río de la Plata.¹ In the beginning, the word “tango” was associated with the music of enslaved Black people on the eastern coast of Latin America as expressed in their instruments, dances, or festivities. Later, the name was applied to an Afro-Argentine, Afro-Uruguayan way to recreate certain European musical forms introduced

to the New World. This musical genre of tango resulted from the blend of the *habanera* and *milonga* as well as popular and traditional melodies circulating in the Río de la Plata region.

The *habanera* as both music and dance, originated in Cuba and was derived from the European *contradance*. Although the *contradance* was born in England as the “country dance,” it was later adopted by France and Spain as *contredanse* and *contra danza*, respectively.² From Spain, it moved to Cuba, where it mingled with Afro-Cuban music and changed its name first to *danza habanera* then simply to *habanera*. With its characteristic accompanimental rhythm of a dotted eighth note, sixteenth note, and two eighth notes, and frequent use of syncopation and triplets in the melody (Ex. 1.1),³ the *habanera* traveled in its most popular versions together with traded goods shipped down the Atlantic coastline until it reached the Río de la Plata region. Eventually, it returned to Spain, where it was considered a new genre, as its *contradanza* origin was no longer recognized. Then, the people in Spain called this new music “American tango” when they used it in plays, especially when illustrating scenes with Black characters in the Americas. At other times, they called it “*habanera*” when they converted it into a ballroom dance of embracing partners. After settling in Spain, both “American tango” and the “*habanera*” returned to the Americas, specifically Buenos Aires, where both types met the *milonga* and the popular Afro-Cuban *habanera* brought in by sailors.

The origin of the *milonga* is uncertain, though it was already found in the outskirts of Buenos Aires by 1880, yet it clearly absorbed the rhythm of the *habanera*. The term “*milonga*” – perhaps of African roots – also designates both the music and dance art form and the venue where the dance takes place. In addition to being sung in the countryside, the *milonga*, as an art form, became very popular when sung in the theater and the circus. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the *milonga* merged with early tango. Yet, it still lives on today as folk music in rural areas and as one of the *tres ritmos* (three rhythms) of tango (tango, *milonga*, and *vals*). Some piano scores were published using both the labels “tango”

Example 1.1 *Contradance (habanera)* of the nineteenth century.



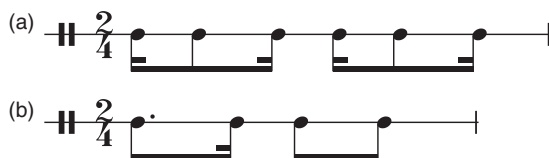
and “*milonga*,” proving the close association of the two genres. As these two genres’ music began to fuse at the turn of the twentieth century, composers interspersed short popular melodies in their tangos. Simultaneously, African descendants played this ebullient music, adding traits characteristic of the Afro-Argentine culture. During Carnival, in particular, the Black population, enslaved or freed, participated in their lively activities. Although no recordings of the musical accompaniments have survived, there can be no doubt that the Afro-Argentine musical expressions were crucial in the origins of tango.⁴

By the turn of the twentieth century, tango music began to take on its own shape as an independent genre. While still called at times “*milonga*,” “*habanera*,” “*tango habanera*,” and “*tango milonga*,” it became the same identifiable music, and eventually, all these names converged into a single one: “tango.” The music presented peculiarities that set it apart from the forerunners that contributed to its creation. Tango scholars have identified and defined these distinct features to typically include an initial motive that defines a distinct musical character and identity; a formal structure comprised of three sixteen-bar sections, with a contrasting third section called a trio (occasionally, these early tangos had only two sections); a four-bar phrase structure; a *habanera* melodic amphibrach rhythm (short-long-short, Ex. 1.2a); and a *habanera* accompanimental rhythm (Ex. 1.2b).

Dissemination of Early Tango Music

Early tango music, commonly called the *guardia vieja* (Old Guard) by scholars, was disseminated by piano scores and early audio recordings. Publishers printed piano sheet music in great numbers to be played in affluent homes by those who could afford a piano, which in those days were imported in large numbers. This upper-class audience also listened to tango recorded on wax cylinders and shellac. With such intense commercial and industrial activity, tango expanded to all social levels and was no longer restricted exclusively to brothels.⁵

Example 1.2 *Habanera* rhythms. a. Melodic amphibrach rhythm. b. Accompanimental rhythm.



As tango became popular, phonographic activity intensified. The existence of around 2,800 recordings reflects how the early genre took shape until 1920, a date scholars agree signals the end of the first leg of tango's history and the *guardia vieja*. Many of these early recordings have survived and been reissued, which makes it possible to listen to early tango music recorded by a variety of ensembles from this era, including brass bands, *rondallas* (typically string groups, though they later had more eclectic formations), and *orquestas típicas criollas* (creole, or local Argentine, typical orchestras).

Military-style brass bands began to make tango recordings around 1907. Some were Argentine, like the Buenos Aires Municipal Band. Others were foreign, like the Republican Guard Band from Paris, which made several recordings on order by a Buenos Aires department store, for example, in the tango "El Sargento Cabral" ("The Sergeant Cabral," WL 1.1). These brass bands performed tango arrangements originally for piano in an *habanera* rhythm with a brilliant timbre and a choppy gay air characteristic of the first tangos. The *rondallas* recordings of tango reflect a less martial style, which, while perhaps less professional, sound warmer and more amiable. These two types of ensembles stopped recording around 1913–1914 and were replaced in the public favor by quartets with bandoneón – an instrument of German origin brought to Argentina by immigrants in the late nineteenth century and adopted by tango musicians beginning around 1905.

Early Tango Ensembles

One of the great *guardia vieja* musicians, bandoneonist Vicente Greco (1888–1924), made his first recording in 1910 with his quartet of bandoneón, guitar, violin, and flute. The recording label called the ensemble an *orquesta típica criolla*, a designation that continues to denote the classical formation of a tango ensemble as an *orquesta típica*. The bandoneón was immediately a huge success, and bandoneón players became stars. Quartets performed in all tango venues and began to appear in downtown cafes. All quartets played without written scores in the same straightforward style, where the flute, violin, and bandoneón carried the melody while the guitar provided the rhythmic accompaniment. The sections of each composition were repeated with no change or embellishment. Despite the structural and stylistic monotony, the groups' sound, particularly that of the bandoneón, captivated audiences. Besides Greco's quartet, other bandoneonists formed ensembles, including Juan "Pacho"

Maglio (1881–1934, the most popular bandoneonist of the time), Arturo Bernstein (1882–1935), Eduardo Arolas (1892–1924, the most charismatic bandoneonist), and Astor Bolognini (1890–1985). Pianist Roberto Firpo (1884–1969) was the first to incorporate the piano into his orchestra in 1914.

Toward the end of the 1910s, tango ensembles changed, as flutes were left out, the piano replaced the guitar, and the string group expanded to include bass (and sometimes cello). As the ensembles consolidated their formations, the tuning differences among the three core instruments – piano, bandoneón, and strings – created a sound profile musicians call *mugre* (dirt or grit). It became a fundamental sound to the tango style, which also includes special effects such as noise, clusters, and percussive sounds, as opposed to a “pure sound” standard in European classical playing.⁶ While these subtle tuning differences resulted in noise from an acoustic perspective, tango actually adopted them as an expressive technique rather than rejected them.

At the same time, some *guardia vieja* musicians became more discerning in their expressive style. In 1917, Eduardo Arolas and his ensemble produced recordings imbued with symbolic purpose, dramatism, and melancholy far from his predecessors’ interpretive simplicity and lack of nuance. In these recordings, one example being “Moñito” (“Bow Tie,” WL 1.2), one can sense the change in the accompaniment that would soon take place, in which musicians would leave behind the *habanera* and replace it with four equal pulses called *marcato*. Arolas exerted a great influence on tango since the prominent musicians who forged the future style either played with him or admired him. Although nicknamed “El Tigre del bandoneón” (“The Tiger of the Bandoneón”), neither he nor his colleagues had great technical facility on their instrument. Arolas was also a prolific composer; his tangos are still part of the standard tango repertory today. Other relevant composers of the time were Roberto Firpo, Juan Maglio, José Martínez (1890–1939), Enrique Delfino (1895–1967), and Juan Carlos Cobián (1896–1953).

In the late 1910s/early 1920s, some musicians with academic studies began to perform tango, attaining a correct and expressive interpretation and a precise orchestral intonation. That was the case of Orquesta Típica Select, an ensemble of two violins, bandoneón, piano, and violoncello that made fifty-two 78 rpm recordings in Camden, New Jersey, USA in 1920. Additionally, there are hints in these versions that some of the instrumental parts were notated.⁷

The Orquesta Típica Select recordings ended the first period in the history of tango,⁸ even as they anticipated the way tango would be

performed in the coming years. The *marcato* accompaniment – four equal beats – was standardized, as well as the instrumentation of piano, bass, bandoneón, and strings. For the first time and from present listening standards, the group's performance sounds more precise, played by trained professional musicians, for example, in "Don Esteban" (WL 1.3). Thus, 1920 is the hinge year between the two periods of the *guardia vieja* and the next, usually called the *guardia nueva* (New Guard).

Early Tango Dance

The second way one may study tango is through the dance. Some sources mentioned it near the end of the nineteenth century, and newspaper articles described it as fashionable in their Carnival chronicles in 1900. The dance's main features were the holding of the partner close in a veritable and connected embrace, the *corte* (cut), and the *quebrada* (break). The *corte* is a pause or interruption of the step associated with abrupt silences in the music, and the *quebrada* is the wiggle of the hips.⁹

Dancing with a *quebrada* and a close hold of the partner were part of several other dances, especially the *habanera*. Around 1890, this was the way of dancing both the *habanera* and the tango until eventually, the *habanera* was set aside, and this style of dance became associated exclusively with the tango. Some accounts comment on the provocative touching of the thighs and the close contact resulting from the *corte* linked to the musical pause. The *habanera* did not have such discontinuities; it lacked rhythmic or melodic interruptions caused by syncopations, off-beats, or silences. These features were particular to tango. The most remarkable aspect of the choreography is that it arose directly from the music; it is not repeated pre-established steps but different impromptu moves with the addition of *cortes* and *quebradas*. In fact, "*corte y quebrada*" became a synonym for danced tango.

Magazines and newspapers from the period confirm how by 1900 tango choreography had been accepted and settled as a popular and well-established dance. It supplanted contemporary dances such as polka and *habanera*, which gradually declined and disappeared. By 1903, tango was widely adopted during Carnival parties, and magazine and newspaper articles remark on the great variety of impromptu *cortes* and *quebradas* tried out by dancers.

As time progressed, community recreational gatherings included tango dance with music played by various early ensembles. Tango was also danced in *casitas* (little houses, but more accurately brothels rented by

the night) that were tolerated by society, yet disguised. As a result of the intense instrumental and dancing activities in these *casitas*, tango came to be considered a whorehouse dance. Great pianists/composers of the time performed there, like Manuel Campoamor (1877–1941), Rosendo Mendizábal (1868–1913), and Alfredo Bevilacqua (1874–1942), while other performers and important creators of the earliest instrumental style of tango organized bands, such as Vicente Greco, Ernesto Ponzio (1885–1934), and Genaro Vázquez. The laws in downtown Buenos Aires prohibited brothels, alcohol, and dancing; therefore, tango was played and danced in the outskirts of the city, where there was a potent focus of creativity and musical tutoring. Summer restaurants and cafes patronized by families by day became dinner concerts by night; the best known was the legendary Lo de Hansen (Hansen's). And finally, tango was danced at academies, teaching venues of diverse social levels, and the *peringundines* (sordid places for dance) in the slum neighborhoods.

As tango dance reached great popularity and became commonplace in the city between 1905 and 1910, it was no longer mentioned as new or remarkable in the news. Some critical articles, however, addressed the more controversial social venues where it was both played and danced. The dance's popularity also gave rise to a simplified choreography. The most common dance style was *tango liso* (smooth tango), suitable for untrained dancers, followed by more virtuoso tango styles with complex steps and moves, and a competition style performed by trained dancers.

In 1911, tango entered the aristocratic ballrooms of Paris and became an instant success because of its exoticism and voluptuous undertones. The fad went beyond the dance and encompassed fashion and other social practices. Dance tutors, both Argentine and European, proliferated, and standard choreography, cleaned up to avoid erotic innuendos, emerged. When Buenos Aires learned of the Parisian success of tango, the reluctant elites were bewildered and debated accepting it, but by doing so, they broadened tango's popularity. Although ballrooms closed during World War I, tango came back in full force in 1919, and it has remained relatively popular in Europe, Argentina, and throughout the world up to today.

Early Tango Poetry and the Tango Canción

The third form of tango, apart from the instrumental music and the dance, is the sung version or the so-called *tango canción*.¹⁰ The first compositions with lyrics are from the early twentieth century, and their content was

influenced by the *criollo* tangos from the *zarzuela* (Spanish theatrical musical genre). In the very first recordings, several performers included tango in their repertory. The best-known female singers were Pepita Avellaneda (1874–1951), Lola Membrives (1888–1969), Flora Gobbi (1883–1952), Linda Thelma (1879–1939), and André Vivianne (1863–1909); the well-known male singers included Alfredo Eusebio Gobbi (1877–1938), Mario Pardo (1887–1986), and Ángel Villoldo (1861–1919). Theatre ensembles accompanied them in ad hoc formations or, quite often, a single piano or guitar. The first lyrics were self-descriptive and cocky, in the style of *zarzuela* tangos.

The rise of Carlos Gardel (1890–1935) as a tango singer toward the end of this early period would be fundamental for the genre's future. In the early part of his professional career, Gardel dedicated himself primarily to folk repertory. Accompanied by guitar, he recorded his first tango in 1917, "Mi noche triste" ("My Sad Night," Samuel Castriota/Pascual Contursi, WL 1.4). This famous record opened new paths for tango for several reasons. First, the novel lyrics told a story about unrequited love. Second, as Gardel chose the guitar for accompaniment, which had primarily been used in folk music, the instrument became a standard fixture of tango.¹¹ Last, Gardel sang with a particular phrasing and rubato that echoed the accent and intonation of the language of Buenos Aires; it was a free rhythm that contrasted with the set pulse of the accompaniment. Gardel's extraordinary talent as an interpreter and the compelling appeal of the lyrics and music made that recording the starting point of the new *tango canción*, and its influence reaches to the present.

Stylistic Development of Tango: 1920–1935

While music, dance, and poetry continued to meld into the multidimensional tango genre beyond the early period of the 1910s, I mainly focus on the musical changes that took place for the remainder of this chapter. During the transitional years from the *guardia vieja* and *guardia nueva*, more than 11,000 recordings were made between 1917 and 1923, and listening to them reveals how very different instrumental tango became after 1920. The various ensembles established a standard instrumentation and polished their arrangements, even adding *variaciones* (variations) that reiterate the main melody embellished with running passagework. Yet, these new arrangements were quite simple as the musicians rehearsed and later played them either by memory or following a piano score.

Three leading figures and bandleaders emerged at this time: Osvaldo Fresedo (1897–1984), Juan Carlos Cobián (1896–1953), and Julio De Caro (1899–1980). The interpretations by the ensembles of Fresedo in 1922 and Cobián in 1923 set down an orchestral style characterized by a clear rendition of the melody with careful and precise graded dynamics. Their stylistic counterpart was expressed by Julio De Caro's *sexteto típico* (typical sextet), which established a standard formation of two violins, two bandoneones, piano, and bass. It capitalized on the experience of Cobián and Fresedo, but it also generalized the use of other tango features. De Caro translated Gardel's vocal rubato into an instrumental expression and expanded the ensemble's timbre by giving a more significant part to the bandoneones, which used their specific instrumental techniques like *rezongos* (clusters that make a grumbling sound) and *lloros* (cries, created by minor-second *apoggiaturas*) to create a rougher sound. The great interpretive diversity both Fresedo and De Caro introduced led to a change in the tango's structure, as newly composed pieces did not need three sections to achieve interpretive variety, and so the trios (the third section) were omitted.

All of these instrumental innovations defined the stylistic profile of the *guardia nueva* in the early 1920s and have nurtured tango performances to the present day. The genre consolidated anomalies that set it apart from the European musical canon – the use of unconventional instruments, vocal and instrumental melodies expressed with a particular popular rubato, and lyrics that incorporated the local *Lunfardo* (Buenos Aires slang). Fresedo and De Caro embraced progressive styles by incorporating novelties and possessing a will to polish interpretation, for example, in the Sexteto Julio De Caro's recording of "Mis lágrimas" ("My Tears," WL 1.5). Notably, Fresedo and De Caro had long careers as orchestra leaders and made hundreds of records. In contrast, other orchestras, like those of Francisco Canaro and Roberto Firpo, continued with the traditional format characterized by a steady tempo, a hammering beat effective for dancing, simple harmonies, a clearly defined melody with little rubato, and performing the standard repertory.

The lyricists (sometimes famous poets) wrote in a language that mirrored a high tension between the upper and lower classes, contrasting *Lunfardo* and street speech with classy language and favoring popular culture over canonic culture.¹² Thus, the lyrics became imbued with popular language and slang. Those written only in "correct" upper-class language were considered false and in the wrong style rather than credible tango.

Above all, the most relevant consideration in these stylistic differences between the two Guards is how tango developed. While the *guardia vieja* played tango with an original sound for its time, musicians used European instruments such as the piano, brass bands, and strings. After the emergence of the local *orquesta típica*, musicians began to develop unique interpretive devices that distinctly set the genre apart. In this way, the *guardia nueva* started from an original store of idiosyncratic instrumental forces and techniques and adapted them to tango's expressive needs, thus leaving behind the European academic standards or ignoring them.

At first, the orchestras included very few sung tangos until Francisco Canaro (1888–1964) added a singer to his orchestra in 1926. The early tango singer was called an *estribillista*, because he only sang the *estribillo* (chorus) or a fragment of the lyrics and was not a well-known soloist. Canaro even considered the singer as just a mere ornament. The sung version of tango grew with distinguished and famous soloists accompanied by small ensembles or their own orchestras. Male singers were known as *cantores* and female singers as *cancionistas*. In addition to Gardel, the best-known *cantores* were Ignacio Corsini (1891–1967), Agustín Magaldi (1898–1938), and Charlo (1906–1990); the most famous *cancionistas* were Rosita Quiroga (1896–1984), Tita Merello (1905–2002), Azucena Maizani (1902–1970), Mercedes Simone (1904–1990), Libertad Lamarque (1908–2000), and Ada Falcón (1905–2002). All these singers recorded hundreds of tangos. New songwriters and popular, acclaimed poets became tango literary figures: Celedonio Flores (1896–1947), Pascual Contursi (1888–1932), Homero Manzi (1907–1951), and Francisco García Jiménez (1898–1983), among the most celebrated.

Danced tango continued with the basic traits described earlier here, but the couples now did not look in the same direction and moved together. In this modified style, the man advanced, and the woman stepped back, so they were more or less facing each other. There were still different degrees of complexity, the simplest being a sequence of walking steps with a steady rhythm and the most complex, including a variety of figures with the legs and feet. Additionally, the man always led, cueing the woman through the energy in his chest and exerting a slight pressure with his hand on her waist or back. There are multiple examples of how tango was danced in films, which incorporated tango as a great attraction from its beginnings. Examples include *Tango!* (1933) written and directed by Luis Moglia Barth; Carlos Gardel danced in both *Cuesta abajo* (*Going Down*, 1934) directed by Louis Gasnier, and *Tango Bar* (1935) directed by John Reinhardt; *Los tres berretines* (*The Three Pastimes*, 1933) directed by Enrique Susini; *Así es el tango*

(*That's the Tango*, 1937) written and directed by Eduardo Morera; and *La vida es un Tango* (*Life Is a Tango*, 1939) written and directed by Manuel Romero.

The prosperity of tango met a serious setback with the economic crisis of 1930, caused by the New York Stock Exchange crash in October 1929. Many of the orchestras created in the peak years had to break up. Only the best-known directors continued their much-diminished activities. Unemployment and the loss of buying power significantly impacted the population's ability to purchase nonessential goods like records or entertainment. The total yearly phonographic recordings began to drop year after year until 1935, when a slow recovery started. Interestingly, 1935 is a symbolic hinge between this period and the next because of two relevant events that year: the successful launching of the new orchestra of Juan D'Arienzo (1900–1976) and Carlos Gardel's premature death. But more than just these two events, the music changed substantially before and after that year.

The Golden Age: 1935–1955

Juan D'Arienzo's orchestra appeared as something new, fresh, and light, even though some musicians considered it somewhat primitive as it contrasted the complexity of the De Caro-style sextets and Fresedo's orchestras. As D'Arienzo helped usher in the Golden Age of tango, which spanned from the 1930s to the mid-1950s, he based his straightforward interpretation on traditionalism. Although at variance with the somewhat antiquated but solid and set style of Canaro, D'Arienzo's fresh simplicity conquered not only new audiences but also dancers, giving rise to new popularity for the practice. Other directors followed this stylistic trend, and once the economic crisis subsided, the public's reaction was massive and formidable.

On the other hand, Gardel's tragic death in 1935 seemed to signal the end of the cycle of great solo singers and begin another. In this next stage, a new type of singer emerged, one whose enormous popularity became associated with the most prestigious *orquestas típicas*. These singers and orchestras included Francisco Fiorentino (1905–1955) and Alberto Marino (1923–1989) with Aníbal Troilo (1914–1975) and his orchestra, Raúl Berón (1920–1982) with the orchestra of Lucio Demare (1906–1974), Roberto Chanel (1914–1972) with Osvaldo Pugliese (1905–1995) and his orchestra, and Alberto Podestá (1924–2015) with the orchestra of Carlos Di Sarli

(1903–1960). Even as these and other singers succeeded with famous *orquestas típicas*, they continued their solo careers.

Due to the convergence of style changes, the end of the period, and the socio-economic developments, the tango recorded after 1935 sounds quite different from that of the 1920s and early 1930s. From a musical perspective, the most salient innovations are the playing in faster *tempi*, a clearer presence of the melody, and the adoption of a standard formation for the *orquesta típica* with at least three bandoneones, three violins, piano, and bass. In addition, excellent arrangers emerged, and composers created a new repertory that effectively competed with the traditional one.

D'Arienzo's enormous public success caused other musicians to form and create orchestras with the same musical drive. At first, almost all of them copied D'Arienzo's basic stylistic traits and somewhat primitive sound, including his rapid pace and simplicity. Canaro was still the main leader of the traditionalists, followed by Francisco Lomuto (1893–1950), Rodolfo Biagi (1906–1969), Alfredo De Angelis (1910–1992), and D'Arienzo himself. But gradually, musical quality gained influence over commercial success, and the more skilled musicians of the new orchestras made possible the re-emergence of the interpretive styles of the 1920s trends, now renovated and enriched. The progressives continued to follow De Caro or Fresedo. The orchestras of Pedro Laurenz (1902–1972), Troilo, Demare, Pugliese, and Alfredo Gobbi (1912–1965), in particular, adopted the instrumental and compositional techniques of De Caro's orchestra, with bandoneones taking the lead and a fluid, intense approach to melody called *fraseo* (tango phrasing). The orchestras of Di Sarli, Miguel Caló (1907–1972), Osmar Maderna (1918–1951), and Domingo Federico (1916–2000) followed Fresedo's lead by emphasizing the strings employing clear rubato and utilizing typical tango effects.

The 1940s, the peak of the Golden Age, is the richest time of tango. Even the abundant number of ensembles could hardly keep up with the demand of the multitude of dancers, who by then had adopted a standard set of basic steps. The limited length of the 78 rpm records kept the pieces about three minutes long. This short time frame for a piece demonstrated the arrangers' skill, the directors' personality, and the outstanding performers as they concentrated tango into a rich poetic, popular, and symbolic identity. At the same time, they supported a dance practiced by almost everybody with both standard and virtuoso skills.

Troilo best represents the spirit of the 1940s. While a master of his instrument, the bandoneón, Troilo also possessed a deep understanding of the orchestra as he expertly led hired professional arrangers. He was also

a great composer and was gifted in identifying the best lyrics, many of which he set to music. His orchestra performed versions of the most popular tangos and with the best voices of the time. Among his more than 400 recordings, one would have difficulty finding a piece of less than outstanding quality.

Fresedo's sumptuous orchestral renditions and Di Sarli's lavish use of the violins formed a counterpoint to the De Caro-like sound cultivated by Troilo. Specifically, Di Sarli counterbalanced the minimal use of the bandoneones with his piano technique overflowing with off-beats and rhythmic surprises in the bass register. Contrastingly, Pugliese's style was more inclined to the textural and rhythmic challenges of the De Caro school.

The great orchestral leaders in the Golden Age illustrate a wide interpretive variety of tango music. They created particular traits with consistent and recognizable styles, and many had careers that, in some cases, lasted decades. It was also a period of great singers, who usually started their path to success by working with some of the foremost orchestras and eventually became soloists. More than ever before, many tango fans held up singers as idols not only because of their personal qualities but also because of the repertory that grew with excellent lyrics written by new poets like José María Contursi (1911–1972) and Manzi.

Dancing tango was a mandatory activity for the citizens of Buenos Aires. The newspapers carried, literally, hundreds of ads for dancing halls and venues, almost all with a live orchestra. The choreographic variations were coupled with one or another orchestra. Dancers who followed Pugliese were famous because of his difficult changes in rhythm, off-beats, and bandoneón rubato phrasing – all characteristics that were too challenging to follow for the average dancer.

Tango's boom lasted until 1955, at which point the military coup in Argentina affected dramatic changes in cultural policy. The public's preferences also began to change at this time, as it shifted to internationally popular hits. These two factors demonstrate a turning point for tango in 1955.

Astor Piazzolla (1921–1992) emerged as one of the most important figures at the end of the Golden Age as he shifted the trajectory of tango's musical style at the height of the period's musical development. With his innovative group Octeto Buenos Aires, Piazzolla created revolutionary works and avant-garde arrangements between 1955 and 1957. His style describes an end of an epoch in musical terms. After this, the new cultural policies and the changes in some social customs and behavior began to undermine the reign of tango in public preferences.

The Triumph of *Nuevo Tango* (New Tango): 1955–1990

President Juan Perón's fall from office in Argentina in 1955 caused profound changes in the cultural policy. As the borders opened to industrialized cultural products, mainly from the United States, people started to listen and dance to other genres, like *música tropical* (a general term for salsa, mambo, samba, etc.), jazz, and Brazilian tunes. Soon, tango was displaced as the most popular genre in Argentina as the dancing was gradually abandoned and the music scene changed. Tango became relegated to expensive venues like music clubs, where one could listen to the best musicians without the dance-hall environment.

The end of the 1950s carried on the traditions of the past, but in the 1960s, the *nuevo tango* (New Tango) created by Piazzolla steadily grew in importance. With his quintet of bandoneón, violin, electric guitar, piano, and bass, Piazzolla defined a new sound for tango, solidly rooted in features proper to the genre. Yet, he approached tango unlike the traditional style by composing pieces in new formal structures conceptually influenced by jazz and art music. His pieces usually contain a fast, rhythmic part contrasting a slow, melodic section, and they are not meant for dancing but for listening. He created a new melodic profile with rhythms taken from tango's rubato but written down in the score, and he generalized the use of an asymmetrical rhythmic grouping commonly referred to as 3-3-2 (eight eighth notes in 4/4 with stresses on the first, the fourth, and the seventh notes, Ex. 1.3).

In the 1960s, traditional tango kept losing popularity, while Argentina's national rock took over almost all the venues dedicated to younger audiences. Also, in that decade, music based on modernized folk and country music grew in popularity with the so-called *boom del folklore* (folklore boom). Piazzolla, one of the few tango success stories of the 1960s, had to settle in Europe to carry on his innovative projects. In the 1970s and 1980s, tango had fewer and fewer followers, and dancing and orchestra venues were scarce. Many musicians lost their jobs, and the younger ones cultivated careers in other forms of popular music.

Though tango found it hard to survive in Buenos Aires, it still endured in this period. Even with reduced audiences, a shrunken musical scene, and

Example 1.3 The 3-3-2 rhythm characteristic of Piazzolla's music.



the competition of other genres, some new musicians besides Piazzolla carried tango forward with excellent musical creations, including Leopoldo Federico (1927–2014), Atilio Stampone (1926–2022), Osvaldo Berlingieri (1928–2015), Ernesto Baffa (1932–2016), and Osvaldo Piro (b. 1937). Later, projects of Rodolfo Mederos (b. 1940) blended rock influences with tango; Dino Saluzzi (b. 1935) embraced a broader scope of musical fusion that characterized the times; and the trio of Néstor Marconi (b. 1942) and the orchestra of Raúl Garello (1936–2016) incorporated even more modernizing options with jazz and percussion.

The best-known singers – like Roberto Goyeneche (1926–1994), Edmundo Rivero (1911–1986), and Floreal Ruiz (1916–1978) – continued their soloist careers followed by their faithful fans. They made many albums with a new approach to tango singing that featured a greater emphasis on both the lyrics over the rhythmic beat and the interplay between free phrasing and regular accompaniment. Many singers leaned toward an off-beat expression, like those by Susana Rinaldi (b. 1935) and Juan Cedrón (b. 1939). As for the lyrics, the great pieces from the Golden Age were very much alive even as Cátulo Castillo (1906–1975), Homero Expósito (1918–1987), and several others kept writing and composing. While the new topics moved away from the standard themes of the Golden Age, they did not reach the communicative power tango had in the 1940s. The most popular new creations were by Eladia Blázquez (1931–2005) and Horacio Ferrer (1933–2014) in collaboration with Piazzolla.

There was a certain outcry for the loss of tango's traditions, which at the time seemed irreversible, and some government agencies even tried interventions. In 1980, the city government created the Orquesta de Tango de Buenos Aires, which is still active today. In 1986, the Escuela de Música Popular de Avellaneda (EMPA, School of Popular Music of Avellaneda) opened, offering a degree for tango musicians as performers, composers, and arrangers. The show *Tango Argentino*, which combined an excellent instrumental ensemble, well-known singers, and a troupe of tango dancers, marked an important turning point for the genre. The show opened with great acclaim in Paris in 1983 and then on Broadway in 1985–1986. This success brought back to life the interest in the dance all over the world, and with it, a new demand for tango musicians in Europe and the United States. Thus, musicians who had been part of the Golden Age, together with those of the new generation, found in these new institutions and shows a chance to devote themselves full time to tango.

Contemporary Tango: 1990–2020

In the 1990s, interest in Europe and tourists who wanted to see tango at its birthplace drove a renaissance of the genre. The combination of finding jobs, musical training, and a new identification with tango sparked the emergence of a new generation of musicians, both bandoneonists and other instrumentalists. One of the earliest of these new ensembles was El Arranque, which features a style characteristic of the 1960s with a modernized Troilo-like format.

Diverging from the trend to play tango with small ensemble formations (following Piazzolla's quintet paradigm with some instrumental variance) or a pop-up orchestra just for a tour or gig, some young musicians started to organize *orquestas típicas* of at least three bandoneones, three violins, piano, and bass. Orquesta Típica Fernández Branca (later Fernández Fierro, or OTFF) formed in 1999, and similar orchestras followed suit. At first, OTFF copied Pugliese's style quite accurately, but eventually, it drifted to an almost percussive tango with orchestrations based on chained riffs. They have become the most stable feature of contemporary tango in Buenos Aires, with uninterrupted performances in their own venue and a large audience of mostly young people. The group has had several offshoots, either caused by splits in the ensemble or the need to follow personal projects. Derrotas Cadenas and the Julio Coviello (b. 1983) Quartet represent the most significant, with their punk nuances due to their dry and spontaneous sound. Julián Peralta (b. 1974), the first conductor of the OTFF, subsequently created the Astillero ensemble, also Pugliese-like but with more influence from Piazzolla, and an *orquesta típica* that has recorded two anthologies of contemporary tangos with lyrics.

Tango in the new generation reflects organic rock influences since these musicians grew up with this music before moving on to tango. That influence is also perceptible in many of the new lyrics written for this contemporary version of the genre by Alfredo Rubín (b. 1961), Acho Estol (b. 1964), Alejandro Szwarzman (b. 1961), and Matías Mauricio (b. 1978). There are several singing styles: Ariel Ardit (b. 1974) follows the long-lived Gardelian tradition; others, like Omar Mollo (b. 1950) or Julieta Laso (b. 1982), prefer the vocalization derived from rock.

Present-day tango is engaged in a rather complex dialogue with its roots, ranging from outright imitation to recombining rules and conventions for novel results. Traditional styles are likely weightier than Piazzolla's *nuevo tango*, though his music permeates everything. More traditional

manifestations based on Troilo and Piazzolla aesthetics, yet still in a modern language, include violinist Ramiro Gallo (b. 1966) and the ensembles of the brothers Lautaro (bandoneón, b. 1987) and Emiliano (piano, b. 1983) Greco. The dialogues between the roots of tango and other contemporary music have produced interesting results like Sonia Possetti's (b. 1973) blend of Piazzolla and Egberto Gismonti or Marcelo Nisinman's (b. 1970) versions of contemporary art music colored by Piazzollian tradition. Yet another line is the combination of electronic music with some traditional traits practiced by several ensembles, such as the remarkable Gotan Project in Paris.

In recent years, some groups have gained ground among the imitative trend by playing the original scores of diverse historical styles as art music. The formation of the Quinteto Astor Piazzolla, a Grammy winner, replicates the composer's original arrangements or exact transcriptions of his recordings. Sónico, an ensemble residing in Brussels, revives original compositions by Eduardo Rovira (1925–1980). Some versions of the traditional *orquestas típicas*, never part of the highbrow canon of tango history (like D'Arienzo's orchestra), have been rejuvenated with such refinement and instrumental delicacy that they sound like chamber music. This is the case of the Silbando orchestra in Paris, conducted by Chlöe Pfeiffer. Many orchestras have been formed in Europe, and some follow the imitation mode, like the Sexteto Canyengue (Rotterdam). Other European orchestras follow a very personal contemporary style, like Fleurs Noires, Andrea Marsili's sextet, or the quartet of French bandoneonist Louise Jallu.

Danced tango, though not on a massive scale, is profusely practiced in many venues in Buenos Aires and Argentine cities. Some new choreographies feature an alternation between the leader and follower role – something unthinkable before in such a male-chauvinist dance. Traditional hetero-norms have also been left behind with the emergence of various gender combinations for dancing partners.

The present-day tango scene in Argentina shows great flexibility and diversity. For example, the Orquesta Escuela de Tango Emilio Balcarce, created in 2000, cultivates all known orchestral styles with their original arrangements, while other ensembles and soloists of various styles work regularly. At present, about one hundred ensembles exist throughout the country, including those both well-established and others in fluid formations. All these factors reveal how the genre is going through a period of great creativity and expansion. Though not on as massive a scale as it used to be, tango shows a vitality today that promotes the emergence of great new talents and the permanence of a specialized audience.

Notes

1. For further reading on early tango, see Jorge Novati, ed. *Antología del tango rioplatense, vol 1: Desde sus orígenes hasta 1920* (1980; 4th ed., Buenos Aires: Instituto Nacional de Musicología, 2018).
2. Fred Burford, rev. Anne Daye, “Contredanse,” *Grove Music Online*, ed. Deane Root, accessed April 14, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.06376>.
3. From Alejo Carpentier, *La música en Cuba* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1972), 142. Quoted in Novati, *Antología del tango rioplatense*, 17.
4. Omar García Brunelli, “Bases para una aproximación razonable a la cuestión del componente afro del tango,” *Revista Argentina de Musicología* 18 (2018): 91–124. Editors’ note: see also Alberto’s Chapter 14 for more information regarding African origins of tango.
5. For more information, see Enrique Binda and Hugo Lamas, *El tango en la sociedad porteña 1880–1920* (Buenos Aires: Héctor Lorenzo Lucci Ediciones, 1998).
6. Nicolás Varchausky, “El ruido original del tango: viaje al centro de la orquesta típica,” *Revista Argentina de Musicología* 15–16 (2014–2015): 181–190.
7. Enrique Binda, “La ‘otra’ Orquesta Típica Select,” *Todotango*, accessed April 14, 2022, www.todotango.com/historias/cronica/374/La-otra-Orquesta-Tipica-Select.
8. Novati, *Antología del tango rioplatense*, 241.
9. Inés Cuello, “La coreografía del tango,” in *Antología del Tango Rioplatense, Vol I (Desde sus comienzos hasta 1920)*, ed. Jorge Novati (Buenos Aires: Instituto Nacional de Musicología “Carlos Vega,” 2018), 125.
10. Throughout this book, the editors chose the term *tango canción* to describe the genre of sung tango and translate it literally throughout for consistency. However, some scholars disagree with this phrase and many scholars in Argentina use the phrases *tango instrumental* and *tango cantando* (instrumental tango or sung tango).
11. Omar García Brunelli, “Gardel músico. Su proyección en la historia del tango,” in *El mudo del tango. Ocho estudios sobre Carlos Gardel*, Omar García Brunelli, ed. (Buenos Aires: Instituto Nacional de Musicología, 2020), 59–76.
12. For more information, see Rosalba Campra, *Como con bronca y junando . . . : La retórica del tango* (Buenos Aires: Edicial, 1996).

Further Reading

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