

## ASTOR PIAZZOLLA'S "TANGO SUITE" FOR TWO GUITARS: GENRE AND STYLE ASPECTS

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**SUMMARY.** Astor Piazzolla's "Tango Suite" for two guitars is studied in terms of their embodiment of Argentine genre traditions. The aim of the article is to reveal the authentic features of the tango genre in their historical dynamics and style reconstruction using the linguistic resources of academic and jazz traditions. The rhythmic idioms of tango, asymmetrical accent figures, the genesis and specificity of polymeters are identified. The sonotypes of timbral everyday presentations of tango are correlated with solo and ensemble concert performances. Sound-imaging and percussive techniques of imitating the timbres of orchestral instruments with guitar sound are traced. The linguistic elements of tango are systematized according to the semantics of the musical images of the dance. The style features of the tango nuevo vocabulary are identified, and the nature of innovative components is indicated based on the analysis of each of the guitar pieces.

**Keywords:** Argentine music, Astor Piazzolla's guitar works, tango, guitar ensemble, performance techniques, genre and style aspects.

### 1. Introduction

In the music world, the name Astor Piazzolla (Ástor Piazzolla, 1921–1992) – a composer, virtuoso bandoneon player, conductor, and arranger is firmly associated with the history of Argentine tango. It is immortalized in the pages of more than three hundred compositions written by the musician for various instruments, ensembles, and orchestras. Piazzolla's ensemble guitar tangos are few in number, but they have become key virtuoso cycles in the contemporary repertoire and require a high level of academic skill from performers.

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In contemporary musicology, a number of general and local vectors of research have been formed in the study of this area of creativity. The first group includes monographic works<sup>2</sup>. In the second group, it is worth highlighting the publications devoted to specific topics. These are descriptions of the specifics of the language of tango<sup>3</sup>, systematization of special playing techniques that imitate other orchestral timbres with guitar sounds<sup>4</sup>. Separately, it is worth mentioning articles devoted to performance aspects, in particular, interviews with famous guitarists<sup>5</sup>, the creation of arrangements of guitar compositions for folk orchestras, and the practice of artistic interpretation<sup>6</sup> or highlighting well-known biographical information about guitar performer<sup>7</sup>.

The aim of this article is to identify authentic features of the genre in Astor Piazzolla's ensemble guitar tangos in their historical dynamics and style reconstruction through the renewal of the musical language of the academic and jazz traditions, using the example of the cycle "Tango Suite" for two guitars.

## 2. "Tango suite" for two guitars by Astor Piazzolla

The sound world of "Tango Suite" (1984) – one of the Argentine master's most famous guitar compositions – represents an organic fusion of various traditions: the authentic genre, widespread in folk music and embodied in popular national idioms; the academic thinking and compositional techniques of Alberto Ginastera, Bela Bartók, and Igor Stravinsky, whose compositions Astor Piazzolla studied in particular depth, as well as jazz culture, which was close to him since his time living in the United States, especially cool jazz and its representatives – Stan Getz, Chet Baker, Bill Evans, and Gerry Mulligan.

<sup>2</sup> Azzi, Maria S. *Le Grand Tango: The Life and Music of Astor Piazzolla*. Encuentros. No. 36. IDB Cultural Center, 2000

<sup>3</sup> Nishimaye, Alvarez, Nahuel, Franco. *La obra para guitarra de Astor Piazzolla y las guardias del tango*. Universidad Católica de Salta, 2019. 208 p. Link: <https://core.ac.uk/download/390096248.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Drago, Alejandro M. *Instrumental Tango Idioms in the Symphonic Works and Orchestral Arrangements of Astor Piazzolla. Performance and Notational Problems: A Conductor's Perspective*. (DMA Dissertation). The University of Southern Mississippi, 2008. 189 p.

<sup>5</sup> Jackson, Blair, Teicholz, Marc. *Sérgio Assad on Piazzolla, the Beatles, Ginastera, Transcriptions, and more*. Classical guitar. 2018. Spring. Link: <https://classicalguitarmagazine.com/sergio-assad-on-piazzolla-the-beatles-ginastera-transcriptions-and-more/>

<sup>6</sup> Cherepanyn, Myron, Dutchak, Violetta, Paliichuk, Iryna, Bulda, Maryna, Zhovnir, Stanislav, Spodarenko, Viktor. *Creativity of Astor Piazzolla in the context of the development of folk instrumental performance*. AD ALTA. 2023. Vol. 13 (1). pp. 84–90.

<sup>7</sup> Zhovnir, Stanislav. *Representation of Astor Piazzolla's work in guitar art of the second half of the 20th to the beginning of the 21st century*. Bulletin of the Kyiv National University of Culture and Arts. 2018. Series: Musical art, 2, pp.125–135.

The external reason for creating the "Tango Suite" was a keen desire to dedicate it to the unique duo of Brazilian guitarists Sergio and Odir Assad, in whose performance he heard arrangements of his own music and was extraordinarily impressed by them. The dialogue between these brilliant performers from the academic school opened up new perspectives for concert presentations of tango – highly virtuosic compositions capable of reflecting the archetypes of the genre in its full ensemble and orchestral sound with the resources of a guitar duo, while at the same time introducing a new musical vocabulary. In an interview with Sergio Assad about Astor Piazzolla's music, the guitarist recalls: "We first met him in person in Paris, where Piazzolla had lived for many years, and played some arrangements of his music that I had made for a guitar duo. I used diminished chords that created a descending arpeggio-like movement, and he went crazy for it. I think he heard something in it that surprised him, and he liked it. Then, when we got the "Tango Suite", that musical figure was there! The end of the first part is exactly what I did. But really, nothing needed to be changed in his music – it was all wonderful, perfectly written for two guitars"<sup>8</sup>.

The music of the "Tango Suite" became a spectacular creative product of synthesis, a wide range of interactions between academic, popular, and jazz music intertwined with the genre roots of tango. The cycle laid one of the key foundations of the chamber repertoire of contemporary guitarists. It clearly displays the rhythmic idioms of tango, derived from the syncopated patterns of the Afro-Cuban version of the habanera, as well as the 3+3+2 polymeters that originate from the genre's genesis of tango and Argentine milonga. The textural layers perform a variety of functions, usually distributed among the voices and timbres of quintets or octets. In terms of performance, this requires musicians to imitate them, including by means of new percussive and figurative techniques and specific effects. Each of the three parts of the suite demonstrates this to the fullest. A multifaceted analysis of the suite from the perspective of genre and style interactions, timbral allusions, and imitations of the sounds of other *tango-nuevo* instruments by guitars represents a broader discourse of research.

The three parts of the "Tango Suite", with all their sharp contrasts of imagery, flamboyant emotions, and tempo differences (Allegro libero – Andante rubato, melancolico – Allegro), form a cyclical integrity, without excluding the

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<sup>8</sup> Jackson, Blair, Teicholz, Marc. Sérgio Assad on Piazzolla, the Beatles, Ginastera, Transcriptions, and more. Classical guitar. 2018. Spring. Link: <https://classicalguitarmagazine.com/sergio-assad-on-piazzolla-the-beatles-ginastera-transcriptions-and-more/>

possibility of performing the pieces separately. Each tango is a narrative with a dramatically affected plot, a love story across the entire emotional and sensual spectrum.

The high degree of contrast between thematic elements serves as an idiom for all parts of the cycle. It manifests itself in the richness and theatricality of rapidly flashing “frames,” collage-like and colorful alternations in the carnival customs of South American countries. It is characteristic that within each of the three pieces, new thematic formations are included in the process of developing the form at all its stages – at the moment of exposing the theme and its subsequent improvisations (doubles of variations, coming from the practice of playing jazz standards), which develop, at first glance, spontaneously, but are precisely written in the author’s text. Spectacular figurative and thematic contrasts are laid between the main sections of the form, but they also often arise in the areas of connecting transitions between them (*bridges*). This greatly enhances the effect of surprise, density, and high concentration of new thematic formations in the form, giving it a feature of assemblage and kaleidoscopicity – qualities that are not characteristic of authentic tango models but have become the trademark of Astor Piazzolla’s *tango nuevo*. Sometimes the variety of contrasts is a consequence of anticipating the new vocabulary of the next section, the next piece, or, conversely, it serves as a reminiscence, an unconscious reminder of the melodies and phrases of tango created by the composer earlier.

The idiomatic repertoire of artistic means of the musical language of tango has clear distinctions. Each of the spheres of imagery is accompanied by its own system of linguistic elements. Some of them are aimed at creating a sound atmosphere of an impulsive-decisive, spontaneous-improvisational character and serve as the embodiment of masculine muscularity of movements, attacking passionate impulses in dance. Others are characteristic of the revival of archaic-tribal, ritual-magical ostinato figures, leading back to the African American roots of the energy of rhythm and the plasticity of dance movements. Others are organic to the lyrical, confessional nature of languid, sensual lyrics with a touch of sadness and melancholy – the embodiment of eternal femininity. Therefore, when opening the pages of Piazzolla’s tango scores, one should be prepared for high levels of thematic saturation, sharp contrasts, sudden bursts, slowdowns and motivic fragmentation, agogic pauses, polyphonic textures, and changes in types of expression.

**Tango n. 1** from the Suite<sup>9</sup> demonstrates a kaleidoscope of contrasts to the fullest extent. Next to the *Allegro* tempo indication, there is an agogic clarification *libero*. This key characteristic of the “free movement” of tango paradoxically works in conditions of slowdowns and accelerations, while maintaining a clear rhythm pattern in the first guitar part and the characteristic *polymeter* of tango in the second part. The special effects of tango playing with the percussion imitation – bongos and drums – are emphasized by the extraction of sounds of a conventionally fixed pitch (high and low tones) by means of sharp alternating blows with the fingers of both hands on the base, deck, and neck of the instrument. Similarly, the percussion effect *Strappata* (double bass), common for the double bass in the absence of percussion instruments in the ensemble, is created. Among the percussion imitations, palm strikes on the six strings on *f* in the cadence (bars 9–10) are used. Among the characteristic guitar techniques, the composer uses natural harmonics: their quiet echoes can be heard in the modulation transition to the variation of the main theme (bars 11–16) from the main key of *A minor* to *D minor*, and then the melody of the first section of the ABCA form moves through the bridge into areas of bright thematic contrasts.

In the duo, the functions of the solo and accompanying voices are distributed equally – they are delegated alternately to each performer, demonstrating the equal partnership of the virtuosos. First, the main theme is presented in the second guitar part and contains characteristic features of Piazzolla's tango, known not only as a composer but also as a virtuoso bandoneon player. From the first bars, one can hear his special pre-beat tango effect, *arrastre*, borrowed from the practice of playing the bandoneon. It is achieved by stretching the bellows before the attack of the strong beat of the bar, with the resulting increase in density and volume of the chromatic progression (usually ascending), with an energetic opening of the sound and an instantaneous sharp stop. The main melody of the tango is permeated with an idiom of asymmetrical accent rhythms with syncopated figures regulated by the articulation of the first, fourth, and seventh durations in  $\frac{4}{4}$  time. This well-known 3+3+2 tango *polymeter* comes from the milonga genre and is clearly dominant here.

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<sup>9</sup> Footnote to the audio recording of Astor Piazzolla's Tango Suite performed by the guitar duo of brothers Sergio and Odair Assad (Sergio Assad & Odair Assad, 2022). Link: <https://youtu.be/QuJTltA7TfI?si=3GNt9uQeWFyYnJ6->

**Astor Piazzolla. "Tango Suite" for two guitars, Tango n. 1.**

The harmonic transition is driven by an ostinato pedal bass, against which a wave of descending chromatic sequences accelerates. These sequences are made up of major triads and ninth chords. New variations on the theme alter its character – becoming more decisive ( $A_1$  – *deciso*) or more lyrical ( $A_2$  – *A-minor*), but each variation is separated by a bridge section that, in the new context, becomes increasingly contrasting. Transitions between variations heighten tension, infusing the piece with the emotional energy of thematic conflict. On one side is the motoric, rapid, virtuosic movement, culminating in gliding passages and elastic chords marked *ff* along chromatic lines. On the other are lyrical, delicate phrases that emerge unexpectedly – foreshadowing later themes of a similar character, which will form the basis of a separate formal section. In this regard, the contrast between the two types of material before the end of the exposition and the beginning of the *Meno mosso* section is particularly telling (see Example 2). Here, the juxtaposition of two phrases – gentle, languid, and melancholic, with a distinctly

feminine quality – seems to arise not from what has already occurred, but from what is yet to come: the lyrical "core" of the entire composition. This is set against the elastic, ostinato-driven pulsation of the bridge, built on a dissonant harmonic foundation. The composer intensifies the effect through sharply defined polytonal chord combinations, which are related to each other by tritones (A flat<sub>7</sub>–D).

E.g. 2

Astor Piazzolla. Tango n. 1, bars 44–47

Section B – *Più calmo, con grazia* – unfolds with a melodic line composed of a series of dance motifs. It proceeds calmly, with playful grace, punctuated by pauses on artificial harmonics in the upper register. Within a 3+3+2 polymetric framework, two new techniques are introduced and developed. The first is a jazz "riff" typical of 1930s big band style, featuring dense textural layers built on minor triad accompaniment. Its rhythmic impulses recall the patterns of milonga, themselves derived from Afro-Cuban bolero. The second technique establishes a systemic link between harmonic processes, revealing shared structural elements.

The relationships among the minor triads – primarily minor third intervals – are based on modernist, constructivist principles, distinctly removed from traditional tango harmonic patterns (B–C#–B–G–B–C#–D–B–G#–B–E flat–B–G#–E). These kinds of coloristic effects consistently captivated Piazzolla and served as a wellspring of expressive novelty and timbral richness in his tango language.

Section C – *Lento, molto cantabile* – is the most poetic and refined. These lyrics expresses tender, intimate emotions tinged with nostalgia, desire, and quiet pleading resembling a lyrical confession or the imagined plasticity of dance gestures in visual form (Example 3). The melody is gently wrapped in polyphonic accompanying voices, marked by expressive leaps and extended fermatas. Around it flows arpeggiated textures and ornamental figures, enhancing its lyrical and contemplative nature.

## E.g. 3

*Lento, molto cantabile*

80 *p* *CVIII*

*p* *CVII*

85 *f* *CV* *CVII*

**Astor Piazzolla. Tango n. 1, bars 80–86**

The intrusion of another bridge, based on the previous one and in which David Gómez Lucas sees a connection with bebop of the 1940s and 1950s, interrupts the melodious, delicate poetics, suspending it with a rhythm of characteristic syncopations on weak beats (the influence of Afro-Cuban habanera, bars 87–89). The caesura “within” the lyrical theme is overcome by carrying its melody to the end, closing again with energetic bebop motifs. This time, the bridge over the organ point breaks up into streams of descending chordal arpeggios, shifted upward by semitones – leading into the reprise: G flat<sub>7</sub>, G<sub>7</sub>, A flat<sub>7</sub>, A<sub>7</sub>, B flat<sub>7</sub>, with a tritone leap to *на* E<sub>9</sub>.

The reprise presents the expository material with minor alterations, but not in full. Instead of concluding with the main theme in *A-minor*, the piece surges into a final coda marked *ff* – brilliant and virtuosic, like a fireworks display of rapid scalar and arpeggiated passages. These unfold against a backdrop of descending chord silhouettes: F, E, E flat, D, D flat, C, B, B flat, A, As. This final coda is the true culmination of the piece: the apex of virtuosic concert writing, showcasing perfect synchrony between the guitarists. Every note is precisely aligned, executed with filigree precision, as cascades of major and minor triads and ninth chords collide and



intertwine – followed by descending and ascending diminished seventh chords, racing toward the climactic *sff* glissando: a dazzling strike across the open strings. It is this brilliant coda that Sergio Assad remembered fondly in his interview about Piazzolla's music in the duo's repertoire.

**Tango n. 2** opens a new, full-fledged page of lyricism, encompassing the entire composition. Despite the five-part rondo form (ABASA), which usually encourages the pairing of contrasting episodes with refrains, the composer reveals different facets of a single sphere – the quiet beauty of the sensual sound of the strings of the soul, the aestheticization of contemplation and tranquility.

E.g. 4

Andante (♩ = 80) *rubato, melancolico*

Astor Piazzolla. Tango n. 2, bars 1–7

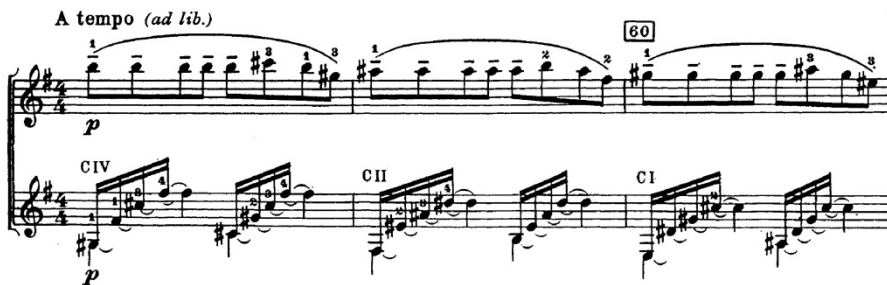
The main melody of the refrain, in *E minor*, sets the emotional tone for the entire tango. The melancholic character of the music is prescribed by the composer in the score: *Andante rubato, melancolico*. A state of serenity and dreaminess, without exaltation, is created by the smoothness of the melodic line, which rises in each phrase; by short motifs that freeze in leaps on high notes; and by fermatas that seem to hold their breath. Descending, lament-like second intervals give the melody shades of nostalgia. Ornamental embellishments – appoggiaturas, suspensions, triplet notes, glissandos, and *Vorschläge* – are the source of melodic refinement. The nature of the coloratura is partly drawn from academic European Baroque instrumental practice, enriched by jazz improvisational techniques and reinforced by the traditions of Moorish melismatic singing.

The downward movement of the bass in semitones, idiomatic in many author's tango compositions, reveals the expressiveness of the Baroque musical-rhetorical figure *passus duriusculus* – a symbol of sadness, memory, regret, or suffering. In this case, its semantics are far removed from the basso ostinato figures in early *passacaglias*, *sarabandes*, or *ricercars*, but nonetheless impart a melancholic tone to the music.

Following the refrain, an episode (B) appears: in a parallel key, featuring a melodically active second guitar part. The two-bar phrases are constructed on a "call-response" principle and are logically connected through a chain of shifts  $a_{13} + D_{13} \rightarrow G$ -major;  $G \text{ minor}_{13} + C_{13} \rightarrow F$ -major;  $B \text{ minor}_{13} + E_{13} \rightarrow A$ -minor;  $A \text{ minor} + D_9 \rightarrow G$ -minor and further into B flat minor, A minor progressing stepwise through modulating jazz sequences leading to the bridge. This link does not return directly to the refrain, but leads instead to an insertion: a paraphrase based on textural variants of episode (B), which prepares the return of the refrain (A).

The reprise of the refrain in the main key contains no significant changes. The new section of the rondo form (C) – a large and internally heterogeneous episode (b. 45–66) – is conventionally divided into fragments that differ syntactically and in tempo. The first fragment continues and develops the previous thematic ideas (B), placing them in a new tonal space: C-major, E flat major, G major, B minor, A minor, G minor. The second (*Lento*) – a concise, and this time slow, "motion" from the distant key of E flat major into other, no less distant tonalities: F# major, E major, B major. The third one creates waves of sequential jazz colors, surrounding the cantilena of melodic phrases with an atmosphere of suspended time, quiet, dreamy, and ghostlike, evoked through the distant echoes of harmonics.

E.g. 5



Astor Piazzolla. Tango n. 2, bars 58–60

The final refrain gives the music a sense of completion, and at the same time, the final frozen fermata of harmonics, as part of an extended tonic chord  $e_{13}$  opens the path to the final section of the cycle.

**Tango n. 3** may be considered the culmination of the entire cyclical concept. This piece surpasses many other examples of Piazzolla's tangos in terms of performance demands, partly because it was originally conceived for the Brazilian duo of the Assad brothers, possessing a unique virtuoso technique of ensemble playing, well known throughout the guitar world. Within the scale of the cycle, this piece finalizes the composer's instrumental explorations in the guitar sphere and, to a certain extent, sums up the composer's experiments at this stage of his creative work.

In the three-part structure of the piece, the main theme is presented in a fast *Allegro* tempo: with springing leaps articulated through the fifth tone *B* in the key of *E minor* (Example 6). It is written in a complex *double polymeter* typical of tango 3+3+3+3+2+2. The melodic contour features a modal Dorian shade (cis) within diatonic figures of *tirata*.

E.g. 6



Astor Piazzolla. Tango n. 3, bars 1–4

An ostinato pedal on the tonic seventh chord – an organ point – is accompanying it in the second guitar part. It is intensified by polychordal layering, formed through semitone displacement of all sounds except the bass pedal, either downward or upward. At first glance, such phenomena might be interpreted as traditional double dominants ( $F\#$ ) and Phrygian ( $F$ ) “Neapolitan” functional chord connections.

However, their systemic role in the organization of the modal-harmonic process is revealed further on: they result from the interweaving of pitch collections and modes of different origins (seven-step diatonic, artificial octatonic, hemiolic).

The outcome is the formation of the polychord  $E_{13}$  – a vertical projection of a flow of horizontal lines “E–G–B–(D)–F#–A#–C#”, serving as a dissonant support.

This occurs repeatedly throughout the piece, primarily in those sections of the form that appeal to aggressive, sharp, motoric gestures, (b. 1–15, 33–40, 71–74, 146–160, 155–160, 177–193). However, the process is finalized by the polychord and closes in the final bars.

### E.g. 7



### Astor Piazzolla. Tango n. 3, bars 215–219

The predominance of dissonant tritones and seconds in the sonority of the polychord is reflected throughout the entire fabric of the composition, giving it a sound reminiscent of the jazz innovations of Chick Corea. In the bridge, the second-based “clashes” between the triads of *B minor* and *C major*, are separated by pauses and sharp palm strikes *sff* across all open strings (*golpe*). In the insistent, bell-like (*like a tocsin*) ostinato beating of chords devoid of any melodic contour (*Pesante*), one can trace the structure of a symmetrical minor-third pitch collection with a 2:1 formula (measured in semitones): the acoustic anchors of the sonorities move within this space – E, F#, A, B flat, G – and through glissando of the dense chordal mass, connect to a new section (B). Here, a completely different element dominates — a lyrical *cantilena* (*Cantabile*, from bar 40) in the high tessitura of a feminine solo. Intonationally, it is close to the beginning of the tango, but by the nature of the arpeggiated accompaniment figures, with inner voices descending chromatically in *B minor* and immediately picked up by a bass motion, it belongs to the realm of deeply expressive lyricism.

E.g. 8



Astor Piazzolla. Tango n. 3, bars 37–45

Enharmonic modulation, along with the upbeat arrastre motion, shifts the tonal platform down by a semitone to B flat minor, simultaneously with a swap of the guitar parts. Immediately afterward, it shifts down another whole tone – to G# minor – and through the bridge, the development arrives at yet another new lyrical theme of the middle section (Example 9). The gentle melody is sustained over a F# minor pedal, consisting of soft, upbeat descending motifs with third-doubling in the upper voices. Its development is enriched with glissando techniques – slides across large upward leaps, chromatic enclosures, appoggiaturas, and other types of ornamentation.

E.g. 9



Astor Piazzolla. Tango n. 3, bars 81–84

Finally, toward the end of the lyrical section, the tension intensifies, a broad field of improvisations emerges, based on previously heard themes, now set within a more saturated modulatory flow that drives them far from the main tonality of the piece, which is achieved through the prolonged sustain of cascading arpeggios within the Spanish Andalusian hemiolic mode (f). The force of percussive guitar techniques propels the overall dynamic forward. The release in the recapitulation (b. 146) briefly slows the boiling passion of the tango, as the already familiar melodies create an associative link – a compositional arch. However, the desire to increase the emotional intensity toward the end of the piece and of the cycle as a whole leads the composer into yet another spiral of play with motives, phrase segments, chords, pitch collections, polyphonic lines, and a spectrum of noises, ultimately finalizing them in a complex organic fusion with the virtuosity of guitar performance.

### 3. Conclusions

As Astor Piazzolla's most frequently performed composition for guitar duet, *Tango Suite* demonstrates the rhythmic idioms of tango and the polymetric rhythms of Argentine milonga, percussive imitations of African percussion instruments, and specific guitar performance techniques. The high degree of figurative contrasts is idiomatic for each piece, creating a collage-like, carnival effect and allowing any part of the cycle to be performed autonomously in concert practice.

The music linguistic means are a mixture of elements of Baroque ornamentation and modern vocabulary. In the *Tango Suite*, the individual stylistic modes of tango nuevo transformed the linguistic paradigm of the Argentine genre, renewed its timbral palette, enriched its intonational and rhythmic foundation, and changed its soundscape thanks to the resources of contemporary academic music and jazz.

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