

ASTOR PIAZZOLLA'S "HISTORY OF TANGO": AN ANTHOLOGY OF THE GENRE IN THE AUTHOR'S PROJECTIONS

TETIANA FILATOVA¹ , TYMUR IVANNIKOV² 

SUMMARY. Astor Piazzolla's chamber cycle "History of Tango" for flute and guitar is examined in terms of its transformation of Latin American, European, and African genre traditions of tango, milonga, samba, habanera, lundu, and maxixe. The aim of this article is to reveal the genre characteristics and dynamics of style changes in 20th-century tango in Astor Piazzolla's author's projections using the selected cycle as an example. The composer's interpretations of the genre allowed the listener to discover the history of tango, enriching traditional elements with baroque idioms and techniques of passacaglia descending chromatic bass, polyphony of contrapuntal accompaniments, and a wealth of melodic ornamentation. Along with this, the composer imbued the fabric of his tangos with jazz improvisation techniques, block chord sequencing, and a language of polystrophic, polymodal structures based on symmetrical scale constructions that were radical for its time. Modifications to the language of the genre do not affect the key attributes of tango, which go back to the dance roots of African-American ritual practices, implying that tango is recognizable to the listener and requires a high level of skill from guitar performers.

Keywords: Argentine music, Astor Piazzolla's guitar compositions, tango, "History of tango," flute and guitar duet, genre and style aspects.

¹ *PhD, Professor at the Department of Theory of Music, the Tchaikovsky National Music Academy of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine. E-mail: filatova.tanya@gmail.com*

² *Dr. habil. of Arts, Associate Professor, Head of the Department of Theory and History of Music Performing, the Tchaikovsky National Music Academy of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine. E-mail: premiere.ivannikov@gmail.com*



1. Introduction

In the modern guitar world, the figure of Astor Piazzolla (1921–1992) is associated with new chapters in the history of Argentine tango. The composer's creative output does not include many compositions written specifically for the guitar or for guitar duets, but each of them is capable of enriching the repertoire of an experienced virtuoso. The concert "case" of contemporary academic musicians is constantly replenished with numerous arrangements for guitar of well-known tangos, which were not originally intended by the author for solo performance or duet. One of the chamber compositions for guitar and flute duet is at the focus of this article. This cycle embodies the trajectory of the genre's development in artistic form and, thanks to its stylization, jazz and modernist vocabulary, has become the only panoramic "document" of the milestones in the history of tango. The timbral interpretation of this text by the voices of the guitar and flute forms the basis of the composer's original concept.

Astor Piazzolla's "History of Tango" for flute and guitar duet is the composer's last composition for such a chamber ensemble, later also known in an arrangement for violin and guitar. The composer's first cyclical guitar project, as we know, was realized two years earlier under the influence of the unique performing artistry of the brilliant Brazilian virtuosos Sergio and Odair Assad, who interpreted his tango with extraordinary skill. This is how the world-famous "Tango Suite" for two guitars (1984) came into being. Later, Sergio Assad recalled his own arrangements of other Piazzolla tangos in one of his interviews: "I started working on his music in the 1970s, when he was not very well known — a little in Europe, more in Brazil — but his music was so modern and so rich! We received the score for "Tango Suite" in 1983 or 1984, although we had been playing Piazzolla's music since 1978 or 1979"³ [Jackson, 2018]. The composer then created Concerto for Guitar and Bandoneon with Orchestra (1985), followed by the cycle "History of Tango" (1986). A virtuoso bandoneon player, Astor Piazzolla, according to Spanish guitarist and professor at the Royal Conservatory in Madrid David Gomez Lucas, "had an amazing willingness to write for different instruments, quickly grasping their idiomatic specifics"⁴.

³ 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/>

⁴ Lucas, David G. *La influencia del jazz en la música de Astor Piazzolla. Análisis de tango suite*. Biblioteca de la Guitarra y Cuerda Pulsada. 2017. P. 1. Link: <https://bibliotecadelaguitarra.com/es/articulo/4397/la-influencia-del-jazz-en-la-musica-de-astor-piazzolla-analisis-de-tango-suite.html>

The title of the cycle reflects the summarizing nature of the author's idea – his vision of the historical dynamics of linguistic means of embodying the genre over several decades under the influence of changes in the everyday characteristics of existence, sociocultural circumstances, and the avalanche-like acquisition of significance of the phenomenon in concert music practice. Astor Piazzolla created his own version of the past and present interpretation of the genre through the lens of the individual style coloring of tango nuevo music. The duet of flute and guitar was also not accidental. The first, rather typical and obvious reason for turning to this combination of timbres lies in the customs of collective tango orchestra music-making, consisting of strings, flute, guitar, bandoneon, with the temporary addition of percussion instruments. The second, deeper reason lies in the tango genre's inheritance of the timbral sonotype of Argentina's soundscape. Its components are inspired by the voices of wind instruments that echo across the Andes mountains and are distinguished by a huge variety of timbres, shades, character, and sound structure, as well as signaling symbols that announce a "place," "event," or ritual. These are Indian instruments of the highlands, which in Inca culture were combined into large orchestras, recreating the ancient local archetype of "wind music" and imitating the sounds of nature or calls to war. There were more than 70 types of archaic wind instruments. Let us recall the authentic ones, the most widespread of which are still used today. First and foremost is the flute family.

Andean flute types differ in details. In the design of a double-row instrument *siku*⁵ has a warm and slightly hoarse sound, associatively connected with the folk music of the Andes. Also, in the construction of the single-row *antara*, the pipes are arranged in the form of steps, connected by strong threads. In Ecuador, the single-row *rondador*, made of cane tubes of different lengths and condor feathers, enables the extraction of two adjacent tones simultaneously, which resembles the chirping of bird voices. The vertical flute *quena* of the indigenous Quechua and Aymara peoples from the mountainous regions of the central Andes is shaped like a slanted bamboo tube with 5–6 holes, allowing the performance of pentatonic melodies within a two-octave range, with a pleasant, slightly husky sound that evokes pastoral landscapes and air currents of the mountain wind. In Argentina, the quena is considered a folkloric attribute, a typical instrument of the "family of winds."

Among the ritual instruments of the Mapuche people is the reed aerophone with a tongue (free-reed wind instrument) – *erke* and *erkencho*,

⁵ The Spanish name for an ancient instrument of Inca origin is – *zampoña*: it produces a sound that imitates birdsong. *Sikuri*, translated from the Aymara language, means pipes that produce sound; *siku* is the name given to small and medium-sized instruments.

widespread in the Salta Province in northern Argentina, as well as in the mountainous regions of Chile, Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador. These varieties of signal horn originate from the ancient indigenous *pututu*, made from a large mollusk shell, and common in northern Argentina's Gran Chaco. The pastoral horn *erkencho* of the Quechua Indians uses, instead of a shell, a hollow cattle horn, which sounds either as a signal for animals or is played by musicians in duet with a neck drum during festive folk ceremonies. This is a small instrument, with a hollow tube up to 35 cm long, to which a bell (horn) is attached. In contrast, the *erke* is significantly larger: it consists of a long cane measuring from three to seven meters, made from several joined tubes, covered with animal intestines or dense flexible fabric. The embouchure hole for air through this reed connects with the adjacent bell and the curved cow horn at its end. During playing, the mouth is covered with the palm, changing the pitch of the sound. The voice of the instrument sounds loudly, resonating in the mountains over many kilometers, and is considered a signal, ritual instrument, one that is believed to summon snow and frost. Among the Mapuche Indians and Creole population, it is used in religious rituals or folkloric festivals.

The Mapuche people have a similar instrument, the *trutruca*, also known as the Patagonian trumpet. It also produces a sharp, loud, rough sound, similar to a military battle cry. Unlike the *erke*, the flexible long reed of the instrument is straight or curved into a loop, and may be made of metal. Apart from the above-mentioned Andean flutes, in the mountain provinces one also finds the *tharqa* – an attribute of Peru's high-altitude Altiplano, familiar from childhood in Quechua and Aymara families. This is a flat wooden pipe of angular shape, 20–60 cm in length, with six finger holes, which during playing requires strong breath and produces a deep, gentle sound. Three varieties of the *tharqa*, differing in size and range, are often played in ensemble on a single melody in octave, in unison, or with constant consonance to thicken the melody. The ethnic indigenous instruments of Patagonia inherit a rich history, reaching back to the ancient culture of the Incas. For them, the sounds of flutes are a symbol of peace, unity with nature, and longing for home.

Among percussion instruments, various types of shakers made from cactus stems were used, whose sound resembles the noise of heavy rain – the so-called “rain flutes.” Among idiophonic percussion instruments in Patagonia, one finds the *cultrún*, similar to a timpani, made from wood and dried gourd, which produces a strong, loud, deep sound. Among string-plucked folk instruments, in everyday life and at modern ethnic festivals of Argentine rural folk music, the *sachaguitarra* is used – an instrument constructed as a combination of the sounds of the mandolin, charango, guitar, and violin.

Thus, certain resonances of the sounds of ancient and modern instruments summarize the characteristic sonotype of Argentine timbres, but its sonoric and phonic qualities are significantly influenced by an instrument of German origin – the bandoneon. It is the bandoneon that complements and embellishes Argentine tango with its voice, making it an unforgettable and distinctive phenomenon. Over time, the bandoneon became a kind of emblem, a “brand” of Argentine tango tradition, a part of the distinctive timbral sonotype of a culture shaped on a hybrid interethnic and international foundation.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to identify the genre characteristics and dynamics of style changes in 20th-century tango in Astor Piazzolla's compositions, using the cycle “History of tango” for flute and guitar as an example.

2. «History of tango» for flute and guitar by Astor Piazzolla

This final composition by the composer for guitar in duet with flute (1986) offers the listener a fascinating journey through the milestones of the genre's historical evolution from the early 20th century. Three of the four parts of the cycle represent the composer's stylization of Argentine tango from various periods. The “sonic lenses” of this artistic manifestation are the genre's defining features that constitute its identity as well as its evolving characteristics, which allow us to determine its historical phase. The titles of each piece specify the chronological and communicative frameworks within which these stylized models existed, and the music makes it easy to trace changes in the vocabulary of rhythm, timbre, intonation, and even gesture and movement in dance.

The first part, **Bordel 1900**, refers to the earliest chronological layer in the history of the genre and therefore demonstrates the initial amplitude of its expressive language. These means are directed toward the emotive outpouring of immigrants who had settled in the river ports of the La Plata region of the Argentine and Uruguayan agglomerations. The musical language has a hybrid nature: a mix of elements from African and Creole cultures with the rural traditions of gaucho cowboys who had moved to Buenos Aires. The rhythm of tango is closely related to the Cuban habanera, as well as to candombe, a dance of African origin from Uruguay and Argentina. The rhythmic foundation is the *compas binario* (binary meter), with syncopation present in the Cuban version of the habanera, and absent in the Spanish, Iberian variant of the dance. Tango was played, sung, and danced in nighttime bordellos, accompanied by guitar, violin, and flute. The authentically criminal atmosphere of tango's existence in the ports combined with the erotic choreography of the dance brought Argentine forms closer to the *tango brasileiro*, the *maxixe*. This dance was sometimes called “cursed” for the erotic

character of its movements, and for its resemblance to African lundu, as well as Brazilian choro and samba. *Maxixe* (the couple-dance version of Afro-Brazilian *lundu* and *batucada*) inherited such movement figures as bent-knee partnering, tight bodily entanglement, and an aggressively charged dance vocabulary, which provoked moral condemnation in society. The rhythm of African paired bongo drums in tango is imitated in the guitar part through strikes on the instrument's body. The flute, with its motoric melody, conveys the lively, festive atmosphere of the cabaret's⁶ regular clientele. The music is graceful; the flute part is rich in ornamentation, with phrases fluttering lightly and rapidly in the high register, like birdsong, pausing in rubato. At the same time, the pulsation of accents on the first, fourth, and seventh beats clearly articulates the tango's polymeter 3+3+2.

E.g. 1

Astor Piazzolla. Bordel 1900, bars 1–12.

Another important rhythmic attribute is introduced in the guitar part – the dotted habanera rhythm (from bar 13), with a descending chromatic motion in the bass – which later permeates the flute part as well. The guitar further complicates the rhythmic pattern with syncopations characteristic of the Cuban version. In addition to the stylization of early tango models, the

⁶ Link to the performance of Astor Piazzolla's History of Tango cycle (2016) by the duo Ensemble der KammerMusikKöln in the lineup of Alja Velkavehr (Flute) and Alberto Mesirca (Guitar):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slrCsvgfAY&ab_channel=EnsemblederKammerMusikK%C3%B6ln

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composer introduces a mass of elements belonging to his individual stylistics: frequent use of *arrastre* techniques derived from bandoneon playing, jazz-like sequences, chromatic bass lines, striking tonal contrasts between sections, changes in tempo and types of expressivity. Within the guitar idiom, the role of percussive techniques grows; for instance, intensified tapping on the instrument's body or strikes on the open strings.

The second part, **Café 1930**, represents a later stage in the evolution of tango: now it is no longer danced, but listened to. Its aesthetics emphasize tender lyricism, quiet beauty, and an unhurried contemplation of melodic silhouettes. The listener's attention is directed toward empathetic experience of lyrical feelings, melancholy, and reflection on refined emotions. The concentration of contemplative lyrical imagery in the piece allows the composer to reveal their various shades. First, the guitar introduction sets the tone for the upcoming dialogue with the flute; then, from the melodies, a three-part composition with a coda is constructed: *aba | c | aba | coda*. The contrasts are expressed through varying degrees of intensity. Flexible lines of descending, melancholic melodies gain in expression through dynamics and sequential shifts in modulating sequences; through accelerations in the development of short, song-like phrases; through rhythmic diminutions in the flute part; and through increases in sound volume and the articulatory force of syncopations and dotted rhythms. Within the lyrical fabric of the tango, one can conditionally read the imagined slow movements of restrained dance passion.

E.g. 2

Astor Piazzolla. Café 1930, bars 14–21.

In the middle section (a tempo tristemente), in the eponymous key of E major, the palette of lyricism becomes brighter in color, despite the expressive markings "sadly, lazily": *tristemente*, *lentamente*. The melodies are richly adorned with improvisational ornamentation: trills, neighbor tones, appoggiaturas, and repetitions. A coda is added to the reprise – a chain of descending sequences: E flat–D–C#–C–B–B flat–A–A flat–B–E – a favorite

compositional device of Piazzolla, involving semitone shifts between links, typical of jazz progressions.

The third part of the cycle, **Nightclub 1960**, represents an important milestone in the journey through the history of tango. It symbolizes the path toward a new image of the genre – one well known to the great master, the creator of globally acclaimed artistic examples of Argentine tango. The period from 1960 to 1980 in the historiography of tango is referred to as the “Piazzolla era”, or tango nuevo. Therefore, the composer’s works, which are more than 300 pieces in this genre, are summarized in the final parts of the cycle through the main markers of his style, similar vocabulary, expressive techniques, and thematic repetitions. The entire spectrum is assembled into a typical model of Piazzolla’s tango nuevo. In the nightclubs of Buenos Aires, the new Argentine tango of the 1960s converged with the Brazilian model of bossa nova through similarities in asymmetric rhythms, the smooth fluidity of melodies, and the language of jazz. The form is built on the juxtaposition of thematic contrasts: rhythmically active, accented fragments and languidly lyrical ones, tinged with sadness and melancholy. Alternating improvisation on each thematic block is highlighted by the play of elements from the composer’s style lexicon. The active dance-like motorics is driven by a chromatic, upbeat ascending bass figure and short flute motifs with graceful repeated notes articulated in staccato. A special elegance is brought in by the habanera rhythm and the articulation of polymetric syncopations typical of tango. In turn, the long bass lines in the guitar part, reminiscent of Baroque bass figures, but stretched across the entire octave range in Piazzolla’s manner, and further carried by various voices in the guitar texture throughout the entire piece, add a tone of languid, tense anticipation to the otherwise playful atmosphere.

Another domain of artistic expression – of sentimental lyricism, contemplation, sorrow, nostalgia – is formed collectively through devices such as slowing the tempo; replacing instrumental motorics with singing cantilena (*Lento molto cantabile*); contrast of tonalities (*A minor* и *A major*). It is felt in the arpeggiated passages of the guitar accompaniment, in the quiet lamenting intonations of “sighs” (*susperatio*), in the semantics of weeping (*doloroso*) in short glissandi between notes of the flute’s ascending leaps, in the play of minor and major harmonic colors, in jazz sequences in the bridges – links between sections. Among the specific performance techniques are evident percussive effects in the flute (blowing out overtone resonances with a sharp attack of the sound).

The last part of the cycle, **Concert d’aujourd’hui** (Modern Concert), astounds with the novelty of its linguistic means and virtuosity, opening paths for the genre from its past toward the future. In the piece the familiar style attribution of Piazzolla’s tango (accent on the even beats of the bar in the chordal guitar accompaniment, glissandi, jazz sequences, vivid contrasts of

imagery) is paradoxically and eccentrically crossed with the compositional techniques of 20th-century academic innovators.

A genre silhouette of tango emerges in the listener's perception, as if seen "through a lens". This effect is like a view through a distorted reflection in a mirror. The reconstruction of the dance's image occurred under the influence of the composer's manifestation of new vocabulary, assimilated from the music of Bela Bartok and Igor Stravinsky. The modernist, constructivist searching of musicians was guided by the impulse to renew sound thinking through the archaic of ancient elements of pagan cultures: their complex rhythms, melismatic vocal vibrations, song-lets, rituals and magical practices – everything that unconsciously captures with primeval overwhelming energy. The intonational nature of the new texture was "sewn together" with intentionally coarse threads: poly-ladic connections, nodal short interval-repeat motives built from minor seconds, thirds, and tritones. They are formed as cells inside artificial symmetrical pitch collections (whole-tone, octatonic), creating ostinato dissonant pedals of major and minor triads simultaneously (with sharp "clashes" between the tones). When the tonal anchors shift, they merge into polycordal, polyplastic, polyostinato platforms, consisting of monolithic or mobile sound complexes. Often the melodic relief against the lower layer is deliberately contrasted. It may be diatonic in itself yet polytopically remote in the upper texture. Such phenomena are found in Piazzolla's piece.

E.g. 3

Presto, molto ritmico • 140

Flûte

Guitare

5

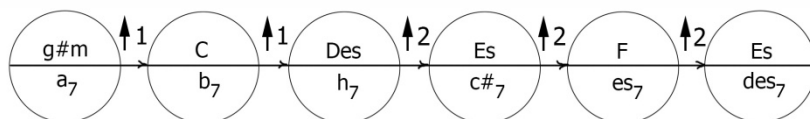
9

Astor Piazzolla. Concert d'aujourd'hui, bars 1–12.

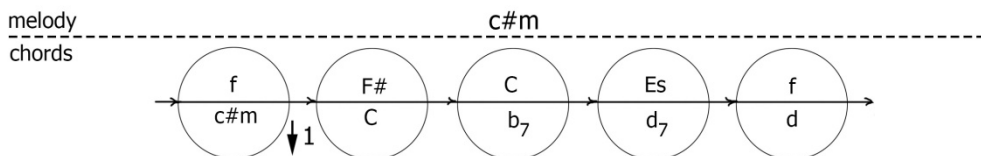
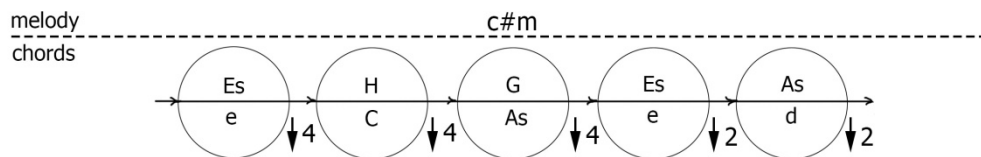
The dissonant nature of the tonal center *A-minor* is reflected in its structure within the framework of the octatonic scale of the 2:1 type (segment measured in semitones): A, B, C, D, D#, F, F#, G#, A. It is based on semitone adjacency of minor triads with the addition of a seventh, under the condition of a lower anchor accentuated by an anacrusis glissando (*arrastre*). The ostinato figure in the bass A, F#, G, E fits perfectly into the pitch-collection concept of the 1:2 type. Other polychords are formed analogously (Scheme 1).

Scheme 1

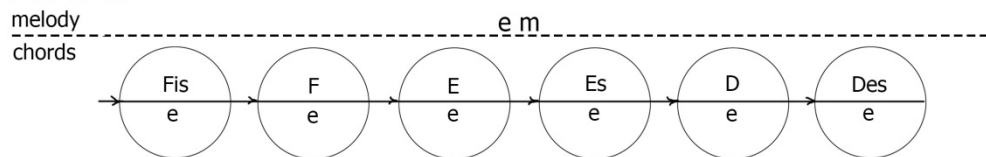
Bars 1-16



Bars 17-42



Bars 43-50



Polychordal Structures and Polytonal Layers

Similar constructivist sonorities – polychordal and polytonal – revealed in the schematic structure have their own combinatorial logic. Minor and major triads shift upward in the bass voice by semitones and whole tones, forming secondal relationships with the triads in the middle voices (bars 1–16). During the flute's solo a fast, rhythmically charged, dance-like diatonic melody in the key of *C # minor* (bars 17–28), the lower layer of the guitar accompaniment consolidates into polychords, moving in symmetrical leaps of major thirds: the foundational bass tones progress along *E–C–A flat–E*, while the chordal layer

moves through *E flat–B–G–E flat*. This creates a tense atmosphere of playful eclecticism, which reaches its peak intensity on a dominant organ point in *ff*, supported by a sustained pedal on the fifth (bars 43–50), as is typical in tango before the arrival of new material. The resulting sonority evokes associations with the Andalusian mode, though here each harmonic step is saturated with chromatic descent – right up to the emergence of a lyrical, cantilena-like, tender melody in *F# minor* (starting from bar 51). This melody is adorned with jazz sequences built from paired, color-rich nonachords and modulations in *D minor* and *C# minor* before reaching the reprise. In this way, the final piece of the cycle sets a trajectory toward the future, demonstrating a fusion of long-standing authentic paradigms of tango language, its connections to African, Iberian, Cuban, and Brazilian roots, and vividly reconstructs the genre's memory through the prism of new style preferences and the composer's mindset, shaped by the experience of jazz performance and academic innovation.

3. Conclusions

Astor Piazzolla's chamber cycle "History of Tango" for flute and guitar represent an anthology of the genre in the composer's own interpretations. It is studied from the perspective of the transformation of Latin American, European, and African genre traditions of tango, milonga, samba, habanera, lundu, and maxixe. The composer's interpretations of the genre allowed the listener to discover the history of tango, enriching traditional elements with baroque idioms and techniques of passacaglia descending chromatic bass, polyphony of contrapuntal accompaniments, and a wealth of melodic ornamentation. These resources allowed the composer to present to the listener the history of tango through his own sonic reading of it, employing Baroque idioms and techniques such as the passacaglia-style descending chromatic bass, contrapuntal polyphony of inner voices, and the richness of melodic ornamentation. At the same time, the composer infused the fabric of his tangos with jazz improvisation techniques, block-chord sequencing, and, for its time, a radical language of polyostinato and poly-modal structures built on symmetrical tonal constructions. These modifications to the genre's language do not compromise its essential attributes, which trace back to the dance roots of Afro-American ritual practices. This ensures the recognizability of tango in the listener's perception and demands a high level of technical mastery from the guitar performers.

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