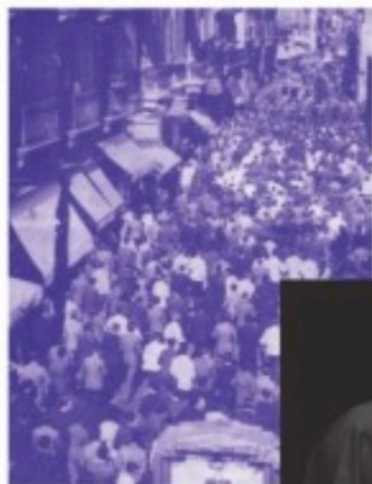


Tango: A Primer



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For chamber musicians hoping to add convincing interpretations of Argentine tango to their repertoire, understanding the genre's unique practices is key. Here, two experts offer a crash course.

BY Kacey Link and Kristin Wendland

Symphony orchestras enthusiastically program Astor Piazzolla's *Four Seasons* on a regular basis. Chamber ensembles, especially piano trios, jump at the opportunity to play "Oblivion" or any other tune arranged by José Bragato. Many composers will gladly try their hand at a short tango or two, and listeners embrace the genre—wittingly or not—on a host of online streaming services. In many American cities and towns, you can even learn to dance the tango at a local dance studio, gym, or community center. Borrowing from a network TV staple, we ask: *So, you think you can tango?*

Now, what if we said, "Violins, in mm. 5–8, employ *fraseo* on the melody. Play *chicharra* in m. 32. Piano needs a heavier *arrastre* in m. 53. Shift from *marcato* to *sinco* in m. 89. Add a 'chan-chan' at the end. And, play more in the style of Troilo instead of D'Arienzo." Can you *really* tango?

Here in the United States, we tend to place tango in a time capsule, regarding it

merely as a dance from the early 1900s, or associating it solely with its most famous practitioners, such as Carlos Gardel and Piazzolla. Moreover, even among professional musicians, we tend to view tango through our preexisting knowledge of either classical music or jazz, depending on our main area of expertise.

But in its native Argentina, tango is a multidimensional art form comprised of dance, music, and poetry with a rich heritage spanning more than a century. As a musical genre, it has grown and developed from its early form as an aural tradition practiced in the *bordellos* (brothels) of rural Buenos Aires to a highly sophisticated genre performed in the city's celebrated opera house, the Teatro Colon. As tango has developed, *tangueros* (tango composers, arrangers, and performers) have solidified the form's defining musical traits and established intrinsic performance practices. That leaves us with the question: *So, how do you tango?*

Step 1: Understand the defining musical elements of tango.

The first step to really understanding tango is knowing the style's essential musical elements. Tango's musical texture is predominately melody and accompaniment. This, in turn, influences other important musical factors, especially rhythm, melody, and harmony.

The early tango *habanera* rhythm, so typical of many Latin musical styles, gave way to three primary accompanimental rhythms in the Argentine tango after the 1920s. *Marcato* (marked), the most basic and essential, simply marks the beat in steady quarter notes. *Sinco* (syncopation), as its name implies, accentuates the off-beats. 3-3-2, one of Piazzolla's signature patterns, transforms the *habanera* dotted rhythm with a tie and speeds it up. These



Clockwise from left: Astor Piazzolla, Carlos Gardel's funeral procession, Quartetango, Damián Bolotin, and the Pablo Ziegler Quartet.

three basic accompanimental rhythms are sometimes preceded by an *arrastré* (from *arrastrar*, "to drag"), a standard anticipatory sliding instrumental technique that pushes to a downbeat.

Tango melody, rooted in the sung tradition of the genre, is also a key musical element, and it may be grouped into two main types. One is a smooth, legato style that we—and many *tangueros*—call *cantando* for its singing quality. This style incorporates an important interpretive practice called *fraseo*, where the performer freely executes a square-notated group of four evenly-notated durations, such as eighth or quarter notes, into a loose triplet or syncopated rhythm. Like "swing" in jazz, *fraseo* creates a smooth and elastic melodic line that floats above the regular beat.

The other predominant melodic style, called *rítmico* (rhythmic), presents the melody squarely on the beat, or syncopated equal divisions of the beat, in two- or three-note groups. It features sharp

articulations with accents, short slurs, and staccatos, and often incorporates *adornos* (ornaments) like turns and mordents.

Harmony in tango, as in most popular music, draws on basic chords and melodies from major and minor keys. Yet, as the genre evolved through time, so did composers' harmonic palettes. Tango harmony became enriched with chromaticism, jazz chords, and even post-tonal sounds.

Also typical for popular music, tango phrases are usually grouped into regular two-, four-, and eight-bar segments. Early tango formal designs followed a three-part layout, usually with an A, B, and Trio section, while later tangos adopted a two-part design, or a three-part *da capo* format. One crucial aspect of form that truly characterizes tango must be mentioned here: the V-I flourish that typically follows the final cadence of a tango, and must be voiced with a 5-1 on top, called the *finale* or "chan-chan" by *tangueros*.

Step 2: learn the basic history of tango.

Tango, in its risqué early stages, grew out of a confluence of native and immigrant cultures—namely, Argentine, Uruguayan, Afro-Argentine/Uruguayan, European, and Jewish—in the Rio de la Plata region at the end of the nineteenth century. By the early 1900s, amateur musicians were forming neighborhood tango ensembles and the art form began moving from the slums to the city center. Through trade routes and recordings, the French caught tango's allure and accelerated its notoriety around the world. Argentines, in turn, reclaimed their native art form, and all classes of society began dancing and listening to tango. [1]

During the 1920s, a new wave of *tangueros*—known as *la guardia nueva*—solidified the basic musical parameters of

tango as a musical genre. They established the *sexteto típico* (standard sextet) of two violins, two bandoneons, piano, and bass (later also known as the *orquesta típica*). With this ensemble, influential *tangueros* like Julio De Caro (1899–1980) refined tango arrangements utilizing the contrasting *ritmico* and *cantando* melodic styles, *marcato* and *sincope* accompanimental rhythms, and *yeites* (tango licks/percussive effects). [2]

Tango then moved into its Golden Age (1932–1955), with ensembles proliferating in numbers and growing in size. In this era, *tangueros* and their orchestras, each experimenting with variations on the genre's melodic styles, rhythms, and performance practices, began creating new sub-styles within the artform. Anibal Troilo (1914–1975), for example—considered by many Argentines to be the greatest *tanguero* and *bandoneonista*—was known for his lush, romantic harmonies and soulful bandoneon solos. Osvaldo Pugliese (1905–1995) utilized extended, strong *arrastres* and dramatic melodic juxtapositions. Juan D'Arienzo (1900–1976), known as “El rey del compás” (The King of Rhythm), favored a more danceable style with crisp *ritmico* melodies in lively tempos. [3]

As rock music grew popular in Argentina and the dance craze subsided, tango transitioned into its post-Golden Age period, with concerts moving from dancehalls to nightclubs. *Tangueros* in turn shifted their

focus to smaller ensembles, exploring new avenues in the realms of instrumentation, harmony, and *yeites*. Piazzolla, for example, developed his *nuevo tango* with the inclusion of the electric guitar, 3-3-2 rhythms, heavy *arrastres*, and extended *yeites*. While Piazzolla is practically synonymous with the tango outside of Argentina, Horacio Salgán (1916–2016), a contemporary of equal fame in Argentina, is credited with exploring guitar in ensemble instrumentation as well as originating the *umpa-umpa*, an off-beat rhythmic pattern. [4]

Over the last two decades, tango has seen a major rebirth both abroad and in Argentina. Practitioners generally follow two basic paths: revitalizing the past, and forging new directions. Those *tangueros* associated with revitalization, unsurprisingly, seek to capture the essence of particular Golden Age styles. *Tangueros* forging new paths often extend the legacies of Salgán and Piazzolla, incorporating jazz and classical idioms into their work while maintaining a tango foundation. [5]

One notable tributary from this forging path is the “Music of Buenos Aires,” or what we call “high-art tango music,” whose notable practitioners include Damián Bolotin, Julián Graciano, Juan Pablo Navarro, Sonia Possetti, and Diego Schissi. Bolotin's “Soniada,” offered to readers at www.chamber-music.org/

extras, is a perfect example of this style. While grounded in characteristic tango style with its rhythmic accompanimental patterns and contrasting *ritmico* and *cantando* melodies, it's harmonies incorporate classical, jazz, and even post-tonal chords.

Step 3: Discover tango's unique performance practices.

Tango's performance practices are intrinsically linked to the musical traits that define the genre. For example, tango's musical texture, as noted previously, imposes two basic roles within the ensemble: melody and accompaniment. As a supplier of melody, one must determine if it is a *ritmico* or *cantando* melody, and make performance-practice decisions accordingly. *Ritmico* melodies generally require a crisp, very short staccato articulation with strongly accented two or three-note slurs. *Cantando* melodies employ *fraseo* to create a loose rubato that accelerates to the downbeat.

To correctly interpret the accompaniment, one must consider the particular style of the *tanguero* in question. D'Arienzo's *marcato*, for example, has accents on every beat, whereas Pugliese's *marcato* features



HEAR THE MUSIC

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[1] We begin with “*Mi noche triste*,” written in 1916 and considered to be the first true *tango canción*. First recorded by tango icon Carlos Gardel (1890?–1935) with a simple guitar accompaniment, this early tango exemplifies *fraseo* in the *cantando* melodic style.

[2] For a sense of De Caro's elegant *guardia nueva* style, listen to “*Boedo*,” whose title refers to a neighborhood in Buenos Aires, and which features a pizzicato introduction in the violins.

accents on beats one and three. Piazzolla favored a strong *arrastre*, an outgrowth of the style of Pugliese. Salgán, on the other hand, liked playing with offbeats, strongly accenting them in his *umpa-umpa* technique.

Yeites, another essential component of performance practice, give the art form its distinctive flavor. This repertoire of percussive effects dates back to the 1920s *sexteto típico* and continues to evolve today. Each instrument of the sextet has its corresponding set of *yeites*, which are occasionally mimicked by other instruments.

The violin's repertoire of *yeites* is the largest and falls into three main categories: effects with the bow, glissandos, and pizzicatos. From the first category, *chicharra* (cicada)—sometimes also called *lija* (sandpaper)—is the playing of a short rhythmic cell on the D string, behind the bridge and next to the frog. *Tangueros* such as De Caro, Salgán, Piazzolla, and Possetti use this *yeite* frequently. *Látigo* (whip), from the second group, is a fast ascending glissando widely used by Piazzolla. It is generally played on the E string with an upbow. *Tambor* (snare drum), from the pizzicato category, is the plucking of the G string with the right hand while the left-hand nail is placed between the G and D strings. This drum-like sound dates back to De Caro, though

tanguero violinists continue to use it widely today.

Notable *yeites* for other instruments include *golpe*, *strappata*, and *campanas*. *Golpe* (knock) is the striking of the hand on the instrument or some other object. *Strappata*, a key bass technique frequently employed by Piazzolla, is a bouncing *col legno* stroke before the beat, with a slap of the fingerboard on the downbeat. This is occasionally followed by a *golpe* on the instrument with the left hand. *Campanas* (bells) are frequently played in the piano as minor seconds in jumping octaves in the upper register.

Born over one hundred years ago, tango remains a living, dynamic art form today, both in its native Buenos Aires and throughout the world, yet it still poses many interpretive stylistic challenges, especially for those of us outside of Argentina. To unlock these performance-style mysteries, musicians must be willing to adventure into the study of the genre's key musical elements, its history and traditions, and its idiomatic performance practices. With this knowledge, musicians can project a convincing performance and confidently say to each other and audiences: *Let's tango!*



PLAY THE MUSIC

Damián Bolotin's "Soniada," originally written for string quartet and available for reference at chamber-music.org/extras, provides an excellent example of a contemporary tango score utilizing the aforementioned performance practices. The introduction alone incorporates many key string *yeites*. As the viola and bass form the rhythm section in 3-3-2 and *síncopa* patterns, the two violins execute a flurry of *chicharra*, *tambor*, and *látigo*. At the introduction's end, the cello adds a resounding *strappata* complete with a *golpe*.

The main part of this tango swings in *rítmico* two-, four-, and eight-bar phrases over a walking cello bass line alternating *marcato* and *síncopa*, with occasional *arrastres*. Towards the end, the two violins spin out fast variations, and the tango concludes with a "chan-chan" flourish ornamented with a reverse *látigo*.

A great way to get acquainted with tango *yeites* and rhythms, this tango is both challenging and fun to play.

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[3] Anibal Troilo's 1970 recording of "Pa' que bailen los muchachos" exemplifies a late Golden Age style with a darkly orchestrated recurring *fraseo* melody. Pugliese's 1952 recording of "La yumba" and D'Arienzo's late Golden-Age arrangement of "La cumparsita" similarly showcase the two composers' individual styles, with the latter featuring a steady *marcato* rhythm.

[4] For a sense of tango's post-Golden Age period, listen to Piazzolla's "Michelangelo 70," featuring typical *nuevo tango* 3-3-2 rhythms and relentlessly driving melody, and Salgán's "A fuego lento," with its continual motivic development.

[5] Los Reyes del Tango, a contemporary ensemble, recreate the driving dance feel of D'Arienzo in "Loca." Bandoneonist Rodolfo Mederos seeks to portray a homogenized distillation of the Golden Age sound in his 2007 trio arrangement of "Mal de amores." Other contemporary sounds of "The Music of Buenos Aires"—including works by Bolotin, Possetti, Graciano, Schissi, and Navarro—bring our playlist to a close.