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Essays

Faces of Tango

by Kacey Link and Kristin Wendland (*Published on August 20, 2020*)

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Introduction: Pathways to Tango

People around the world have had a fascination with tango since it was first exported from Argentina in the 1910s. Readers may have been exposed to tango through television shows such as ‘Dancing with the Stars’ or Hollywood films like *Scent of a Woman* (1992), in which Al Pacino dances with a novice to Carlos Gardel’s ‘Por una cabeza’. Then there is the music of Astor Piazzolla, popular among musicians across the globe in the last twenty years.

In truth, tango is a multidimensional popular art form that encompasses dance, music and poetry. Distinct musical elements identify tango such as rhythm, instrumentation, phrasing, form, harmony and melody. Distinct dance elements visually define tango such as the embrace, a connection between partners and an expression of the music through basic steps and figures. Distinct literary elements, often unnoticed outside of the Spanish-speaking world, also describe the tango, especially themes of sadness, lost love, betrayal, nostalgia, loss of innocence, the fallen woman, disillusionment and fatalism.

In many places of the world, we tend to situate tango in a time capsule, limiting our perspective by either thinking only of the art form’s Golden Age (1932–1955)[1] or associating it with standout icons such as the above-mentioned singer Carlos Gardel (c.1890–1935) and bandoneonist

Astor Piazzolla (1921–1992). Moreover, we often view tango through the lens of classical or jazz music, depending on our point of reference. In Argentina, however, tango is a creation with a rich heritage of over a century. As a musical genre, it has transformed from its early years 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 the art form has developed, *tangueros* (tango composers/arrangers/performers) have solidified the defining musical traits creating distinct performance practices. This leaves us with the questions: what exactly *is* tango and how are we to engage with it as a distinctly aural experience? In this essay, we aim to elaborate on tango's musical dimension to help guide listeners beyond any preconceived or clichéd perceptions, while exploring the faces of tango through the Naxos Music Libraries.

Tango History

At the end of the nineteenth century, 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 Río de la Plata region. By the early 1900s, amateur musicians formed neighborhood tango ensembles and these first generation *tangueros*, known as *la guardia vieja* (the old guard), began to create what have now become tango standards. Famous examples from the early repertory include bandoneonist Eduardo Arolas's 'Comme il faut' (1917), 'Derecho viejo' (1918) and 'Maipo' (1922); composer Ángel Villoldo's 'El choclo' (1905); and pianist Gerardo Matos Rodríguez's 'La cumparsita' (1916). As the art form grew in popularity, it also moved from the outskirts of the city towards the center, becoming more accessible through the advent of piano tango scores and phonographs. Through trade routes and recorded sound in the 1910s, the French caught on to tango's allure and helped to catapult it around the world. Argentines, in turn, sought to reclaim their art form as all classes of society began dancing and listening to tango.

During the 1920s, a new wave of *tangueros*, known as *la guardia nueva* (the new guard), emerged. These musicians learned from the previous masters and then formed their own ensembles to perform new material as well as innovative arrangements of tangos by the former generation. In doing such, they solidified the essential musical parameters that began to define tango as a musical genre. For example, they established the *sexteto típico* (standard sextet) of two violins, two bandoneons, piano and bass. Some famous *tangueros* and their pieces include: violinist Julio De Caro's 'Boedo' (1928), pianist Juan Carlos Cobián's 'Shusheta' (1920) and 'Nostalgias' (1936), and bandoneonist Osvaldo Fresedo's 'Vida mía' (1933).

One other iconic figure of these early years is the great Carlos Gardel. He is probably the most celebrated figure in tango and is credited with establishing the *tango canción* (tango song). Through live performances, recordings, radio broadcasts and film, Gardel propelled himself to international prominence and set the standard for future generations of singers. The famous Argentine saying is '*Carlitos canta mejor cada día*' (Carlos sings better each day).



Carlos Gardel; photo by José María Silva (1933).

As tango commenced its Golden Age in the 1930s, it swept through society and became the most popular dance, music and song of Argentina. Ensembles proliferated in number and increased in size. *Tangueros* began a process of individuation with their own orchestras by creating unique styles linked to how they varied tango melodic phrasing and accompanimental rhythms in their compositions and arrangements, as well as their performance practices. For example, Aníbal Troilo (1914–1975), considered by many Argentines to be the greatest *tanguero* and bandoneonist, is known for his lush, quasi-romantic harmonies and expressive solos as demonstrated in his recording of 'Quejas de bandoneón'. Pianist Osvaldo Pugliese (1905–1995) has a strong, forceful sound and dramatic melodic juxtapositions as heard in his famous 'La yumba'. Contrasting with Troilo and Pugliese, violinist Juan D'Arienzo (1900–1976), known as 'El rey del compás' (The King of Rhythm) favoured a more danceable style with crisp melodies in lively tempos.

Two hallmarks of the Golden Age are the collaborations between composers and poets as well as orchestras and singers. Contrary to the *tangueros* of the previous decades, tango composers and poets now worked closely together to create unified works such as 'Sur', one creation of Troilo's partnership with Homero Manzi (1907–1951). Stemming from the tradition of Gardel, the singer also became an important feature of Golden Age tangos. Prominent singer–orchestra pairings include Troilo and Francisco Fiorentino (1905–1955), and pianist Carlos Di Sarli (1903–1960) and Roberto Rufino (1922–1999).

As the tango-dance craze subsided with the invasion of rock music and dance, tango music moved into a post-Golden Age period and shifted from a dance-hall setting to a nightclub for only listening. *Tangueros* reduced their ensemble sizes and explored new musical avenues. Piazzolla, for example, developed his *nuevo tango* to combine classical, jazz and tango musical styles, as well as the electric guitar. While Piazzolla is practically synonymous with the tango outside of Argentina, inside of Argentina pianist Horacio Salgán (1916–2016) is his contemporary of equal fame. Salgán is credited with exploring the sonorous potential of the guitar in his instrumentation as well as developing his signature *umpa-umpa* or off-beat rhythmic pattern.

In more recent decades, tango witnessed a rebirth both abroad and in Argentina allowing the art form to progress in two basic streams: revitalizing the past and forging new directions.[2] Those *tangueros* associated with revitalization sought to capture the essence of a particular Golden Age style, for example that of D'Arienzo, while others wanted to write new compositions within a homogenized Golden Age sound. *Tangueros* forging new paths often extended the legacies of Salgán and Piazzolla, incorporating jazz and classical elements into their work while maintaining a

tango foundation.

Tango Musical Elements

1. Rhythm

The early tango *habanera* rhythm, typical of many Latin musical styles, also underlays the Argentine *milonga*, which predated tango then developed on a parallel path (see Example 1.a.). In turn, this *milonga* rhythm gave way to three primary accompanimental rhythms found in Argentine tango after the 1920s: *marcato* (marked), the most basic and essential rhythm, simply marks the beat in steady quarter notes (Example 1.c.); *síncopa* (syncopation), as its name implies, accentuates the off-beats (Examples 1.b. and 1.c.); and 3-3-2, one of Piazzolla’s signature patterns, which transforms the *habanera* dotted rhythm with a tie in a faster tempo (Example 1.d.). These three basic accompanimental rhythms may be preceded by an *arrastre* (from *arrastrar*, ‘to drag’), a standard anticipatory sliding instrumental technique that pushes the music to a downbeat (Examples 1.b. and 1.c.).

Example 1: Tango Accompanimental Rhythms

a. *Habanera/milonga* rhythm.



b. *Síncopa* with *arrastre*.



c. Pianist and bandoneonist Julián Plaza’s ‘Danzarín’ piano accompaniment (measures 8-15), illustrating *marcato* and *síncopa* woven between left and right hands, with *arrastre* in the left hand.

Julián Plaza, Danzarín, mm. 8-15

8 Marcato with *síncopa* ↓

12

rall. *slower*

fp

d. 3-3-2.

Characteristic Piazzolla rhythm

3 + 3 + 2 3 + 3 + 2

From milonga rhythm

2. Melody

Melody, a key element stemming from the *tango canción*, may be understood within 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* (phrasing), where the performer freely executes a group of four evenly notated durations, such as eighth or quarter notes, into a loose triplet or syncopated group. Like ‘swing’ in jazz, *fraseo* creates a smooth and elastic melodic line that floats above the regular beat.

The other melodic style, *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.

3. Harmony

Tango harmony, like that of most popular music, originally drew on basic diatonic chords and progressions. Yet, as the genre evolved, so too did composers’ harmonic palettes. As a result, tango harmony became enriched with chromaticism, jazz chords and even post-tonal sounds.

4. Form

Also typical for popular music, tango phrases are usually grouped into regular two-, four- and eight-bar segments. Early tangos followed a three-part structure, 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 rhetorical feature is the flourish that typically follows the final cadence of a tango, voiced with scale degrees 5-1 on top, called the *finale* or ‘chan-chan’ by *tangueros*.

5. Instrumentation

In addition to these core elements, the specific instrumental colors of Argentine tango ensembles and their unique instrumental techniques help define the music. While *la guardia vieja* ensembles often included guitar, flute, violins and bandoneón, *la guardia nueva*'s standard sextet, also called the *orquesta típica criolla* (typical creole orchestra), became the norm (see image below). From the 1930s to the 1950s, the standard sextet expanded to include a string section of up to four violins, perhaps a viola and a cello, with a *fila* (line) of four or more bandoneons. As demand for the dance orchestras dwindled towards the late 1950s and early 1960s, tango ensembles reduced in size, most notably to the 1960 quintet configurations of Piazzolla and Salgán, consisting of bandoneón, violin, guitar (acoustic or electric), piano and bass.



Julio De Caro Sextet, c. 1926–1928. Clockwise from left: Emilio De Caro, violin; Armando Blasco, bandoneón; Vincent Sciarretta, bass; Francisco De Caro, piano; Julio De Caro, violin-cornet; and Pedro Laurenz, bandoneón. Undated photo from the Archivo General de la Nación, Dpto. Doc. Fotográficos, Buenos Aires, Argentina #71339_A. Used by permission.

6. Yeites

A musical vocabulary unique to Argentine tango includes a body of extended techniques and

percussive effects that *tangueros* often refer to as *yeites* ('licks').[3] Like the sliding *arrastre* mentioned above, these techniques color tango's musical palette. *Yeites* may be for a specific instrument or cross over to other instruments. For example, the percussive effect of *chicharra* (cicada) for the violin is executed by playing behind the bridge, close to the frog on the D string, while both bass and piano have their own way to execute *arrastre* and *yumba*. Each instrumentalist also performs their own *golpe* (knock) by tapping or hitting the body of the instrument to produce percussive effects.

Tango in the Naxos Music Libraries

Through briefly examining tango's history and defining musical characteristics, we can observe that the art form has a dynamic past, a diverse present and the potential for a rich future. Some of tango's past and present incarnations can be found within Naxos's three databases of recorded sound. The *Naxos Music Library*, the *Naxos Music Library: World* and the *Naxos Music Library: Jazz* combined create an assorted representation of the art form, while each individual database offers a different face or glimpse into the world of tango.

At the time of writing, a 'tango' search on the general *Naxos Music Library* homepage yields 1,690 items. A few of these feature Argentine musicians playing arrangements of tango standards, such as the Leonardo Ferreyra Tango String Quartet's *Sin Lágrimas* (Acqua, 2009) and a duo CD *Tango de Buenos Aires* (CBC, 2002) by bandoneonist Daniel Binelli (b. 1946) and pianist Linda Lee Thomas (b. 1947). Notably, this second compilation includes an arrangement of Plaza's 'Danzarín', illustrated above, where following an introductory fantasia solo, the bandoneón launches into the *rítmico* melody with the piano in *síncopa* and *marcato* accompanimental rhythms.

For the most part, this Naxos search situates the genre within a classical context. Many of these classical examples include solo musicians, such as guitarists and pianists, or various ensemble configurations crossing over into the tango genre by featuring a tango or two, often by Piazzolla, on an otherwise classical compilation. Some are recordings of Piazzolla's more classical works, such as *Le Grand Tango*, *Las cuatras esatciones porteñas* and *L'histoire du tango*. For example, the CD *Le Grand Tango and Other Dances for Cello and Piano* (Naxos, 1994) by cellist Maria Kliegel and pianist Bernd Glemser features works by Popper, Rachmaninov, Tchaikovsky, de Falla, and Piazzolla's *Le Grand Tango*. Others include music by classical composers who have tried their hand at tango, like John Mackey's 'Redline Tango' for wind ensemble (Naxos, 2006), in which the second slow section features the milonga rhythm and a hint of *síncopa*. You may also encounter tangos from the Yvar Mikoshoof International Tango Collection, such as Conlon Nancarrow's 'Tango?' on a CD of his works (*NANCARROW: Pieces for Small Orchestra /Tango?/String Quartet No. 1*, Naxos, 2005).[4]

One highlight of this classical face of tango is cellist Yo-Yo Ma's album *Soul of the Tango* (Sony Classical, 1997). This CD features Ma and well-established *tangueros* such as bandoneonist Néstor Marconi (b. 1942), guitarist Horacio Malvicino (b. 1929), violinist Antonio Agri (1932–1998) and even Piazzolla himself (in 'Tango Rembrances', thanks to audio mixing). Interestingly, this CD received a mixed reception within the classical and tango worlds. In the classical world, the CD won a Grammy Award for Best Classical Crossover Album, 1999. However, it also received a not-so-favorable 1997 *New York Times* review by Uruguayan pianist and composer Pablo Zinger, who believed that Ma played in a Baroque style and lacked the 'soul of the tango'.[5] This discrepancy in

opinion is not uncommon, because Piazzolla combined tango, classical music and jazz, as a result demanding that the performer be competent all three genres. In any case, this CD was a remarkable feat in the way it melded the classical and tango worlds; moreover, Ma impressively used his international fame to give an even louder and broader voice to the music of Piazzolla and tango, in general.



CD cover, Yo-Yo Ma, *Soul of Tango* (Sony Classical, 1997).

To narrow your search, you may view another face of tango through the 'World' category within the main Naxos Library. If you browse the 241 items there, you will find more well-known Argentine ensembles and artists active today, including singers like Marián Farías Gómez: *Tango* (Acqua, 2016), a CD which includes familiar tango songs by Golden Age maestros such as Troilo. A real gem in this category is the soundtrack to Sally Potter's film *The Tango Lesson* (Sony Classical, 1997). It includes historic recordings such as Gardel singing 'Mi Buenos Aires querido', and examples of some of the most famous tango orchestras from the Golden Age, like guitarist and pianist Juan Dios de Filiberto's 'Quejas de bandoneón' recorded by Troilo's orchestra, Pugliese's 'La yumba' and Di Sarli's 'Bahia blanca'.

The *Naxos Music Library: World* yields 217 items including historic recordings. An excellent compilation is *ARGENTINA – Decadas de oro del tango (Las) (1940–1950)* (Blue Moon Records, 1995). It captures the essential sounds of Argentine tango from some of the greatest tango musicians and singers from the Golden Age as the orchestras evolved with their own distinctive styles, and the album cover features an archival photo of Troilo's orchestra from the height of the dance-band era. Some of the renowned tango orchestra-singer pairings include Ángel D'Agostino (1900–1991)–Ángel Vargas (1904–1959) performing 'Tres esquinas', and Troilo–Fiorentino performing 'María', both of which feature flowing *cantando* melodies with sharp *rítmico* and *marcato* accompaniments in the full orchestra. Some tracks capture the instrumental sound of other popular Golden Age orchestras, like Miguel Caló's recording of 'Inspiración', Alfredo Gobbi's recording of 'Orlando Goñi' and Di Sarli's recording of 'El polito'. Alfredo de Angelis (1910–1992) and his orchestra offer an example of the energetic milonga with their performance of 'Pregonera'. An example of Troilo's later orchestral sound may be heard in the final track with Edmundo Rivero (1911–1986) performing the heart-wrenching 'Sur'.

We focus briefly on one example from this CD by Pugliese to illustrate both his distinctive orchestral sound and some of tango's key musical elements. Pugliese's hallmark style featured an exaggerated *marcato* in two, emphasizing beats 1 and 3, which he called *yumba*. His famous tango

'La yumba' is named after his technique, which strongly drives the rhythm in the opening section. Its sporadic disappearance seems to suspend time in other sections, as the melodies contrast between sharp *rítmico* motives and lyrical *cantando* lines in the A and B sections. Pugliese incorporates string *yeites* in this tango, like the *guitarra* (guitar effect) in the violins and the *strappata* (torn) in the bass in the fourth phrase of the opening section. A dramatic *ritardando* dissipates the driving rhythm at the end of the tango, and it concludes with a final 'chan-chan' played *f-pp* on the offbeats 2 and 4.

One surprising find in the *Naxos Music Library: World* collection titled *SPAIN Tango Festival–International Festival of Tango (Granada, 1973)* (ARC, 2004) shows how tango developed after the Golden Age (the year 1973 in the title is a misprint; it was 1993). The recording features the bandoneonist Leopoldo Federico (1927–2014), who carried the tango torch after the Golden Age, through Argentina's dark period of the 'Dirty War', and into tango's resurgence. While this recording credits Federico for live-recorded tracks of his own tangos 'Retrato de Julil Ahumana' and 'Preludio nochero', and live recordings of other tangos like Héctor Stamponi's 'El último café', the 'anonymous studio orchestra' credited on other tracks like 'Cobián: Variaciones sobre Mi refugio' also sounds like Federico's orchestra. A cross-referencing search of this remarkable CD on YouTube reveals that Marconi, one of the elder statesmen of tango today, joined Federico on this track.[6] On the final track, Marconi and his trio perform Osvaldo Tarantino's 'Ciudad triste', another illustration of contemporary tango. Finally, if you listen closely to the violin solo on the second track, Pugliese's 'La beba', you will hear a young Damián Bolotin (b. 1973), who had first joined Federico's orchestra that year and continues to be a leading *tanguero* today in Buenos Aires.[7]

To bring the face of tango in Argentina up to the present day, the new Sexteto Mayor, reformed from the original sextet established in 1973, offers an homage to original members bandoneonist José Libertella and pianist Oscar Palermo on its CD *Vida, passion y tango* (Challenge, 2008). The recording offers a mix of old and new tangos, including such standards as the *vals* (waltz) 'Desde el alma' by Rosita Melo (1897–1981) and De Caro's 'Tierra querida', and more contemporary tangos by Piazzolla and Libertella. Some of the tracks recorded earlier in 2004 in Germany feature the original members of the legendary sextet.

Incidentally, as tango maintains a strong profile around the world, it has been especially popular in Finland. The Tango Orkesteri Unto has released two CDs. *Finish Tango Vol. 2* (ARC, 2010) features original tangos by Finnish composers. Most of these are tango songs, where the lyrical vocal lines in the Finnish language still capture the essential *cantando* tango style, as in the opening track 'Kylma rakkaus', while other tracks like 'Tangon kotimaa' pulse the quintessential tango rhythms of *síncopa* and *marcato*. Other international faces of tango include a recent release *Gypsy Tango* (ARC, 2020) by the Argentine trio Zingaros, which blends gypsy and tango styles, and instrumentation, and *El Tango de México* (Quindecim Recordings, 2011) by the Orquesta Mexicana de Tango, which features a more classic tango sound.

The *Naxos Music Library: Jazz* offers yet another face of tango. Here, an initial keyword search of 'tango' returns 232 hits, many of these being Piazzolla-inspired extensions of tango. For example, French accordionist Richard Galliano recorded numerous CDs featuring the music of Piazzolla along with his own compositions. The European *tanguero* trio consisting of bandoneonist Juan José Mosalini (b. 1943), pianist Gustavo Beytelmann (b. 1945) and bassist Patrice Caratini (b. 1946) has recorded several tango CDs that continue to further the legacy of Piazzolla. The surprising treasure of this database is the re-release of Piazzolla's 1957 *nuevo tango* CD, the *Octeto Buenos Aires*. Although categorized as contemporary jazz in the Naxos Library, this CD, re-released by Blue

Moon Records in 1995, marks the beginning of Piazzolla's fusion of tango, jazz and classical music. It features fresh takes on tango standards such as Cobián's 'Los mareados' as well as compositions by the up-and-coming generation such as Federico's 'Neotango' (note that Federico was also a bandoneonist in this group) along with Piazzolla's revolutionary 'Marrón y azul'. When listening to 'Marrón y azul', you can hear strong *arrastres*, a plethora of *yeites*, contrasting *rítmico* and *cantando* sections, virtuosic passage work and tango's newest instrument, the electric guitar.

Originating over one hundred years ago, tango is a dynamic art form today with many faces. Yet it poses many challenges to listeners owing to a limited understanding of the art form. To unlock these mysteries, we must be willing to shatter our preconceived time capsule and adventure into the study of the genre's key musical elements, its history and traditions, and its idiomatic sounds. With this knowledge, we can explore with a greater appreciation the many faces of tango as it is interpreted by composers and musicians around the world. We can envelop our ears with a deep listening experience and transport our imagination into the world of tango.

[1] On the dates of the Golden Age, see Kacey Link and Kristin Wendland, *Tracing Tangueoros: Argentine Tango Instrumental Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 51–52.

[2] *Ibid.*, 79–86.

[3] See Figure 3.1: Tango *yeites* in Link and Wendland, 128–29.

[4] For other works in the Mikosho collection, see Wendland, 'The Allure of Tango: Grafting Traditional Performance Practice and Style onto Art-Tangos', *College Music Symposium*, 47 (2007): 1–11.

[5] Pablo Zinger, 'It Took One to Tango: Piazzolla', *New York Times*, 7 December 1997.

[6] 'Leopoldo Federico - Tango en Granada (1993)', accessed 4 August 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPMaTCQPiqU> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPMaTCQPiqU>).

[7] Wendland, email correspondence with Damián Bolotin, 3 August 2020.

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