Culturally Identifying the Performance Practices of Astor Piazzolla's Second Quinteto

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CULTURALLY IDENTIFYING THE PERFORMANCE PRACTICES OF ASTOR PIAZZOLLA’S SECOND QUINTETO

By

Kacey Quin Link

A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty of the University of Miami in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Music

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the requirements for the degree of
Master of Music

CULTURALLY IDENTIFYING THE PERFORMANCE PRACTICES OF ASTOR
PIAZZOLLA’S SECOND QUINTETO

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Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992) captivated Argentine and international audiences with his innovative works in a nuevo tango style and his bandoneón performances. Piazzolla’s success culminated during the 1980s with his second Quinteto, which performed remarkable concerts in venues such as the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires and the Central Park Bandshell in New York, in addition to the performances at the Montreal and Montreux Jazz Festivals. His music also grew popular with a plethora of internationally acclaimed classical and jazz artists as well as with Argentine musicians themselves. However, Piazzolla’s music poses a challenge today, because nuevo tango represents a synthesis of the composer’s musical and cultural backgrounds, conjoining the tango legacy of Buenos Aires, the jazz idioms that he absorbed in New York, and the international traditions of classical music. Many musicians, specifically those from the United States, perform and study nuevo tango without having sufficient prerequisite knowledge of these practices, causing the genre to lose its cultural substance.

By considering the fusion of tango, jazz, and classical genres and incorporating a cross-cultural analysis, this thesis aims to illuminate the basis of Piazzolla’s performance practices. It seeks to identify the yeites (tango instrumental techniques) that define nuevo tango.
tango and to suggest ways that the modern performer can incorporate these stylistic features to produce culturally informed interpretations of Piazzolla’s works. This study focuses on the practices of Piazzolla’s second Quinteto, at the pinnacle of his career, and emphasizes a gestural analysis of the yeites to produce a well-grounded concept of nuevo tango sound. This study concludes that, even though Piazzolla’s compositions represented a fusion of genres, the performance practices (and specifically the gestures) of the second Quinteto are primarily associated with the tango traditions of previous eras. Such gestures embody Piazzolla’s music and thus allow contemporary performers to recreate the evocative and persuasive characteristics of nuevo tango practices today.
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory and Methodology</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS OF NUEVO TANGO</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Birth of the Tango and the Cultural Melting Pot of Buenos Aires</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The guardia vieja (Old Guard): 1890-1917</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The guardia nueva (New Guard): 1920-1955</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>PIAZZOLLA AND THE NUEVO TANGO</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth and Childhood</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artistic Development (1936-1954)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth of the nuevo tango (1955)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Development of nuevo tango (1958-1970)</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Experimental Phase (1971-1978)</td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artistic Pinnacle (1978-1990)</td>
<td>59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postscript</td>
<td>62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>PERFORMANCE PRACTICES OF PIAZZOLLA’S SECOND QUINTETO</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examination of CD Liner Notes</td>
<td>65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quinteto Ensemble</td>
<td>70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Contributions</td>
<td>71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>82</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| | BIBLIOGRAPHY | 85 |
LIST OF MUSICAL EXAMPLES

2.1  *Milonga* Rhythmic Pattern in a 2/4 Time Signature ................................  23
2.2  Descending Melodic Line in “Mi Buenos Aires querido” .......................  33
2.3  *Marcato in quarto* on the Piano ..........................................................  37
2.4  *Tresillo* Derived from the *milonga* Rhythmic Pattern .......................  38
2.5  Alternate Notation of the *tresillo* Rhythmic Pattern ..........................  38
2.6  *Síncopa* ................................................................................................  45
2.7  *Síncopa* on the Piano .........................................................................  46
2.8  Left Hand *bordoneo* Figure ...............................................................  46
2.9  Left and Right Hand *bordoneo* Figure ..............................................  46
4.1  Theme from “Milonga del ángel” ............................................................  69
4.2  Theme from “Adiós Nonino” .................................................................  73
4.3  Piazzolla’s Ornamented Melodic Line of “Adiós Nonino” ....................  73
4.4  “La camorra I” ......................................................................................  79
4.5  Notation of *strappato* from “La camorra I” .........................................  82
LIST OF FIGURES

2.1 Mural of Carlos Gardel by Carlos Páez Vilaró ........................................ 19
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Gestures Translating into Extended Violin Techniques</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

As a result of this experience [listening to Gerry Mulligan’s Octet, Paris 1954], I had the idea of forming the Octeto Buenos Aires ... in a few words, [I wanted to] achieve a tango that would excite, without tiring the performer or the listener. It would still be tango, and, more than anything it would be music.

-Astor Piazzolla¹

These are the words that Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992), the acclaimed Argentine composer and bandoneonista, used to describe his new musical genre, nuevo tango. Piazzolla’s new style combines his musical heritage by fusing together the genres of tango, jazz, and classical music. With this nuevo tango, Piazzolla conceived a genre to which one does not dance, but to which one listens; he desired, as stated, to create, above all else, music. The 1957 recording Astor Piazzolla-Octeto Buenos Aires marks the beginning of Piazzolla’s journey of transforming the traditional tango from the milongas (dance halls) of Buenos Aires to the concert hall tango of the world.²

Defying initial controversy in Argentina, Piazzolla captivated audiences during the second half of the twentieth century with his nuevo tango compositions and bandoneón performances. During his journey, he experimented with his new genre by creating works such as María de Buenos Aires and the Concerto for bandoneón, piano,

¹ “Como resultado de esta experiencia nació en mí idea de formar el Octeto Buenos Aires ... en dos palabras, lograr que el tango entusiasme y no canse al ejecutante ni al oyente, sin que deje de ser tango, y que sea mas que nunca, música.” Astor Piazzolla, Astor Piazzolla-Octeto Buenos Aires, Disc Jockey DIS 15001, 1957, LP. This translation and all others are my own unless otherwise noted.

² Milongas are places in Buenos Aires where one dances the tango. The term also refers to a musical genre that is a precursor to tango, on which Piazzolla sometimes uses as the basis of his compositions.
strings, and percussion, as well as forming innovative tango ensembles such as the *Octeto Buenos Aires* and the *Conjunto 9*. His success culminated in the 1980s with his ensemble, the second *Quinteto*, which performed memorable concerts at the Teatro Colón (Buenos Aires) and Central Park (New York), as well as at the Montreal and Montreux Jazz Festivals.³ In a review of his concert at the Great American Music Hall (San Francisco) in 1988, Brian Auerbach unabashedly attests to the public’s excitement by writing: “My heart is on the table, Piazzolla, and it is yours.”⁴ Additionally, Piazzolla’s *nuevo tango* became popular with internationally acclaimed artists such as Emanuel Ax, Gary Burton, Gidon Kramer, and Yo-Yo Ma as well as with distinguished Argentine musicians including Daniel Barenboim, Damián Bolotín, Nestor Marconi, María José Mentana, and Pablo Ziegler. Opera houses including the Gotham Chamber Opera (New York) and Houston Grand Opera have performed his *María de Buenos Aires*. Additionally, choreographers such as Twyla Tharp and Paul Taylor have created modern dance pieces based on Piazzolla’s music. Through numerous performances and recordings, Piazzolla’s music has gained a global presence within the last thirty years. In fact, one popular opinion in the United States is that Piazzolla’s name is synonymous with the tango.⁵

Since a plethora of musicians from around the world performs Piazzolla’s works, one would assume that his *nuevo tango* compositions are easily accessible to performers from all musical backgrounds. One reviewer, however, discredits many of the recent developments.

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³ The second *Quinteto* consisted of Astor Piazzolla (bandoneón), Fernando Suárez Paz (violin), Horacio Malvicino (electric guitar), Pablo Ziegler (piano), and Héctor Console (bass).


CDs featuring Piazzolla’s works. When describing Yo-Yo Ma’s *Soul of the Tango*, he states: “Mr. Ma sounds eminently Baroque and detached, with [a] beautiful, clean singing tone, but there is no ‘soul of the tango.’” He further states when discussing a recording by Pablo Ziegler and Emanuel Ax: “Mr. Ziegler is a superb pianist who plays tango; Mr. Ax, a superb pianist who doesn’t.” After reading such a scathing review, one wonders what these famous and well-established musicians miss when performing Piazzolla’s *nuevo tango*. How does one account for the discrepancy between the styles of Ziegler and Ax? What musical elements of the style are absent? More importantly, how does one approach studying and performing Piazzolla’s works in order to recreate the exciting, energetic, and dynamic performances that Piazzolla himself achieved?

Studying and performing Piazzolla’s compositions poses a challenge because *nuevo tango* represents a synthesis of his musical and cultural backgrounds. It combines tango from his native city of Buenos Aires, jazz from New York (where he spent a considerable number of his formative and adult years), and international classical music (which he studied under the Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera, and the esteemed French pedagogue Nadia Boulanger). Theoretically, one should therefore have knowledge of all three musical traditions to study and perform his works. This, however, is not the current practice. Many musicians, especially in the United States, perform and study *nuevo tango* without the prerequisite knowledge of its background, causing the genre to lose its cultural substance.

By considering this fusion of genres and incorporating a cross-cultural analysis, this thesis aims to reconstruct Piazzolla’s performance practices. It seeks to determine the musical characteristics that define the *nuevo tango*—specifically, the *yeites* (tango

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instrumental techniques) that are unique to Piazzolla’s style—and the way to incorporate these stylistic traits into a performance of his work. Through a cultural dialogue, this thesis strives to discuss performance practices as a holistic integration of Piazzolla’s heritage.

**Literature Review**

As Piazzolla achieved performance success and his music gained popularity, authors began writing accounts of his life and music. Unfortunately for the serious scholar, only a few of these works are something other than a collection of fan memorabilia or magazine articles. Of the musicologically based literature, there are two notable books discussing the musical aspects of Piazzolla’s works: *Piazzolla: la música límite* by Carlos Kuri and *Estudios sobre la obra de Astor Piazzolla* compiled by Omar García Brunelli.

First published in 1992, Kuri’s book makes the initial attempt at discussing Piazzolla’s music, specifically its aesthetics. He inquires into what constitutes Piazzolla’s style. He examines the composer’s musical transformation of the traditional tango and the development of the nuevo tango. He also discusses the relationship between Piazzolla’s music and that of influential tango, classical, and jazz composers as well as musicians, such as Julio De Caro, Aníbal Troilo, Orlando Goñi, Alberto Ginastera, Igor Stravinsky, Béla Bartók, George Gershwin, and Miles Davis. Kuri states that Piazzolla “metamorphosed” the tango to such an extent that he redefined the cultural and aesthetic identity of the genre. While his observations are an excellent philosophical

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account of Piazzolla’s musical transfigurations, Kuri does not support his argument from a music theoretical basis.

Complied by Omar García Brunelli, the second notable book, *Estudios sobre la obra de Astor Piazzolla*, is a collection of articles dating from 2000-2008 authored by scholars from North and South America as well as from Europe. These articles cover broad musicological themes such as stylistic identity (Ramón Pelinski and Carlos Kuri), tango in Buenos Aires after Piazzolla (Sergio A. Pujol), tango roots (Gabriela Mauriño), the use of tango fugues (Sonia Alejandra López), Piazzolla’s use of the flute (Alejandro Martino), reception history (David Cannata), Gandini’s influence on Piazzolla (Marina Cañardo and Silvia Gerszkowicz), and instrumental rubato and phrase structure (Martín Kutnowski). These articles also discuss specific musical works such as “Adiós Nonino” (Allan Atlas), “Tres minutos con la realidad” (Malena Kuss), “Las camorras” (Omar García Brunelli), and *María de Buenos Aires* (Ulrich Krämer, Bernardo Illari, and Allan Atlas).  

This collection of articles is the most substantial secondary source in Piazzolla scholarship. The authors support their arguments well with research and theory. However, only two of these articles, specifically those by Cañardo/Gerszkowicz and Kutnowski, examine performance practices.

In “‘Tango nuevo, nuevo’ un studio de los aportes de Gerardo Gandini a la música de Astor Piazzolla,” Cañardo and Gerszkowicz discuss the influence that Gandini (the pianist in Piazzolla’s final ensemble, the *Sexteto*) had on the compositions of

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8 For a complete listing of article titles, see the bibliography under the individual author’s name.
Piazzolla. While their conjectures of the stylistic differences between Ziegler (the pianist in Piazzolla’s previous quintet) and Gandini may be true, their argument lacks support. For example, they discuss Gandini’s new use of tone clusters in “Tangueda III” and attribute Piazzolla’s compositional change to Gandini’s influence. However, it is unclear whether the compositional additions to the Sexteto are Piazzolla’s own ideas, which he portrayed to Gandini, or Gandini’s compositional influence. In addition, Cañardo and Gerszkowicz draw compositional comparisons between Gandini and classical composers of the twentieth century, but this is also not supported with musical examples. While the authors might have a valid claim regarding Gandini’s compositional influence on Piazzolla and indirectly his performance practices, Cañardo and Gerszkowicz’s argument lacks the support of evidence and musical examples.

Kutnowski, in his article “Rubato instrumental y estructura de la frase en la música de Astor Piazzolla,” examines the rubato of tango canción (sung tango) and relates it to the rubato and the phrase structure of nuevo tango. He discusses how Carlos Gardel uses rubato in “Viejo Smoking,” and states that rubato is dictated by the dramatic expression and the linguistic characteristics of the text. Then, the author compares the phrase structure in Piazzolla’s instrumental works with Gardel’s use of rubato. Kutnowski’s argument is that the irregular phrase structure of Piazzolla’s instrumental works reflects the irregular rhythm created in Gardel’s melodic use of rubato.

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The other noteworthy article is García Brunelli’s “La obra de Astor Piazzolla y su relación con el tango como especie de música popular urbana.” García Brunelli wrote this article in 1988 (it was published in 1992), and it is one of the first substantial musicological papers devoted to the music of Piazzolla. It traces Piazzolla’s stylistic evolution of nuevo tango by discussing his various ensembles. García Brunelli concludes that while Piazzolla’s nuevo tango has a new appearance, his works are fundamentally derived from previous generations of tango maestros.

There are some notable doctoral essays and a master’s thesis relating to the music of Piazzolla and his performance practices. The most comprehensive discussion of the compositional characteristics of Piazzolla’s works is Pablo Aslan’s master’s thesis, “Tango: Stylistic Evolution and Innovation.” In this thesis, the author traces the stylistic evolution of the instrumental forms of tango and discusses the musical influences of major tangueros (tango musicians) who contributed to the development of the genre.

I-Ching Tsai’s D.M.A. dissertation, “The Evolution of the Tango and Astor Piazzolla’s Tango Nuevo,” is similar to Aslan’s thesis; however, it lacks an in-depth discussion of each tanguero’s style. Also, Tsai chooses an atypical composition, “Flora’s Game” from Three Preludes, for analysis. This dissertation would be a stronger work if the author had analyzed a variety of Piazzolla’s compositional output. The one D.M.A. dissertation that

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12 This is a common term to refer to a musician who is a master of the tango. It is not to be confused with the classical European definition meaning a conductor.


discusses Piazzolla’s performance practices directly is Ysomar Granados’s “A Pianist’s Guide to the Argentine Tango.” Ysomar Granados, “A Pianist’s Guide to the Argentine Tango (Horacio Salgán, Astor Piazzolla)” (D.M.A. document, University of Miami, 2001). This work provides pedagogical information on approaching tango performance through the analysis of works by Horacio Salgán and Piazzolla. While this dissertation claims to discuss performance practices within cultural contexts, it provides the reader with a one-dimensional overview of the topic by not discussing the stylistic genre traits that characterize the tango.


The second biography, Le Grand Tango: The Life and Music of Astor Piazzolla, by María Susana Azzi and Simon Collier, is a description of the life of the composer; however, the book does not provide a comprehensive analysis of Piazzolla’s music as the

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When the music is discussed, there are blatant musical errors, such as the description of the tresillo rhythmic pattern having accents on the eighth-note pulses of one, four, and six. The correct accentuation of this pattern, which is common in the music of Piazzolla, is on the eighth-note pulses of one, four, and seven. The lack of a formal musical discussion in this book is possibly due to the authors’ backgrounds in anthropology and history.

Family members and colleagues of Piazzolla have also written biographies of the composer. These include Astor by the composer’s daughter Diana Piazzolla, and Piazzolla, loco, loco, loco by Oscar López Ruiz. The former work recalls the life of the author’s father; notably, the biography includes correspondence between Piazzolla and various colleagues and friends. The latter biography, by one of Piazzolla’s guitarists, is a personal account of Piazzolla’s life from the perspective of someone who has worked with him. Horacio Ferrer, the poet and librettist of many of Piazzolla’s works, also has a two-volume work, Los tangos de Piazzolla y Ferrer, which discusses the personal relationship the two men shared and the texts of their compositional collaborations.

In recent years, producers have created a series of DVDs showing live footage of Piazzolla’s performances as well as interviews with the composer and his colleagues. This footage includes the DVDs produced by BBC and Deutsche Grammophon. Each

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18 Ibid., 159.


DVD provides an account of different live performances. With these captured video recordings, one can account for the physical motions of performance as well as the non-verbal communication between ensemble members during a performance.

**Theory and Methodology**

Ethnomusicologists study music as an aspect of human culture. Studying from a classical ethnographic perspective allows one to view music as a human creation or specifically as a series of human behaviors that create sound. In *The Anthropology of Music*, Alan Merriam states: “Music sound is the result of human behavioral processes that are shaped by the values, attitudes, and beliefs of the people who comprise a particular culture.” He further states: “Human behavior produces music, but the process is one of continuity; the behavior itself is shaped to produce music sound, and thus the study of one flows into the other.” According to Merriam’s perspective, performance practice is the study and interpretation of a series of human behaviors producing sounds, which are inextricably linked to the culture of those particular human beings.

When discussing approaches to interpreting culture, ethnomusicologists as well as the occasional musicologist cite Clifford Geertz’s theory of aiming toward a “thick description” of culture. Geertz, an anthropologist, asserts that culture is identified and expressed through symbols. In order to understand cultures, one must interpret their

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23 Ibid., 6.
significance. He uses Max Weber’s metaphor that culture is a web spun by human beings, stating:

The concept of culture … is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.24

In his description, each strand of the web is a symbol to aid in the interpretation of a cultural system; however, it can neither exist in solitude nor be analyzed separately. When discussing Geertz’s philosophy, the musicologist Gary Tomlinson states:

“Meanings arise from the connections of one sign to others in its context; without such a cultural context there is no meaning.”25

When interpreting symbols, Geertz states that one must use a “thick description;” thus, one must discuss the implication and meaning behind each symbol or behavior. In order to do this, one must engage in direct interactions with the members of a culture. The ultimate goal of this interaction is not to mimic the culture or obtain a definition, but to create a dialogue of communication that establishes a mutual understanding. As Geertz explains:

[Understanding culture] is what ethnographic research consists of as a personal experience … We [ethnographers] are not … seeking either to become natives (a compromised word in any case) or to mimic them … We are seeking, in the widened sense of the term … to converse with them, a matter a great deal more difficult … than is commonly recognized … Looked at this way, the aim of anthropology is the enlargement of the universe of human discourse … It [culture] is context, something within

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which they [behaviors, institutions, or processes] can be intelligibly—that is, thickly—described.26

The historical musicologist Gary Tomlinson extends Geertz’s philosophy by discussing the implications of engaging in a conversation and then applies these implications to musicology. He contends that observation and theory “do not exist in the rigorous positivist ordering, but rather in a reciprocal, evolving relation.”27 With this statement, he evokes the concept of dialogical hermeneutics in which each aspect of the conversation informs the other. He further states:

Eventually [we] are united in the effort to converse with other cultures and other times by achieving a deeper understanding of the creative acts of their most eloquent representatives, their artists. We cannot comprehend art works (or anything else) outside of a cultural context. It is only a question of whether we opt for a limited and limiting discourse, a solipsistic conversation with ourselves, investing art works with meaning that come to us all too automatically, or choose instead to try to conceive of other meanings, other assumptions, other aspirations and fears. The reward would be not only a more profound knowledge of the works we value, but a fuller comprehension of the humanity we embody.28

According to Geertz and Tomlinson, one cannot study music or specifically performance practices by only accounting for the sounds created. One must study music from a contextual, holistic perspective, which is gained by creating a dialogue between cultures.

Engaging in a conversation with a culture in order to understand its semiotics is a dialectical process of communication between both cultures. This process of communication, as the ethnomusicologist Steven Feld describes, is not “a transmission or force,” or “a ‘thing’ from which people ‘take’ meanings, it is rather, an ongoing

26 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 13-14.


28 Ibid., 362.
engagement in a process of interpreting symbolic form.”

He further suggests that the symbols of a culture or music (or as he states, “musical sound structures”) gain meaning through social interpretation. One identifies his or her personal opinion through social structures, but specifically through location and categorization of similar or dissimilar musical experiences.

One may apply Feld’s theory to the interpretation of Piazzolla’s music. For example, if one listens to “Adiós Nonino,” or more broadly tango music, for the first time in a distant country such as Japan, one’s interpretation is far different from the interpretation of the person who lives in Buenos Aires and hears nuevo tango regularly on the street. This is because each person has a different frame of reference for his or her musical experiences. However, in both cases, each person is engaging, actively or inactively, in communication with Piazzolla’s musical culture and this communication is altering his or her set of musical experiences. This concept can also explain the discrepancy between the musical styles of Pablo Ziegler and Emanuel Ax as aforementioned. In this case, Ziegler comes from the background of working with Piazzolla for many years, whereas Ax comes from the traditional Western classical background. It would be superficial to consider their pianistic style similar.

In light of the foregoing theoretical perspectives, I have chosen to discuss performance practices as a series of behaviors or gestures that produce sound. Additionally, this conception can be enhanced by referencing more traditional Western musical terms such as tempo and rubato. Furthermore, this thesis seeks to establish a

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30 Ibid., 92-93.
dialogue between musical cultures (tango, jazz, and classical music) as well as geographical locales (Argentina and the United States). Through such a dialogue, this thesis aims to enhance human frames of musical reference and ultimately achieve a more holistic interpretation of the fusion that Piazzolla’s music achieved.

Based on the definition of the distinguished Latin American music scholar, Gerard Béhague, this thesis defines a musical performance as an event. Therefore, the study of performance practice is the study of the embedded practices in a particular event. When analyzing a musical event, Béhague suggests that the analysis should:

- concentrate on the actual musical and extra-musical behavior of participants (performers and audience), the consequent social interaction, the meaning of that interaction for the participants, and the rules or codes of performance defined by the community for a specific context or occasion.  

Thus, I examine each performance as an event containing many layers of significance, which provide valuable insights into the variety of Piazzolla’s performance practices.

I base my research on a series of questions that Feld created in his study of the Kaluli people. He inquires into the elasticity of musical form, the relationship between forms and performance settings, how forms change with different personnel and over time, as well as how performances achieve pragmatic and persuasive means. In terms of this study, I apply Feld’s questions to the performance practices of Piazzolla and I extend his questions to include a historical discussion. I ask:

1. How elastic are Piazzolla’s forms and compositions? Do they incorporate improvisation? Are Piazzolla’s compositions altered over time by members of his ensemble?

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2. What is the relationship between types and genres of composition and performance settings? Moreover, what is the relationship between types of compositions and members of the ensemble?

3. How are forms coordinated in a performance? How do multiple recordings of the same piece differ?

4. How does the venue contribute to Piazzolla’s performance practices? Does he alter his style when performing in the Teatro Colón or in Central Park?

5. How do performances achieve evocative or persuasive means? Do gestures contribute to the achievement of these means? If so, what are these gestures? What is the so-called soul of the tango as described by Yo-Yo Ma?

6. How does the traditional tango influence Piazzolla’s *nuevo tango*? Are the aesthetic values the same between the traditional tango and Piazzolla’s new genre? How do Piazzolla’s performance practices reflect his heritage in Argentine culture?

In order to answer these questions, I use a combination of historical and ethnomusicological techniques associated with the study of performance practice.

Similar to traditional historical performance practice methods, I refer to scores, treatises, and instruction books, as well as critical writings, iconographic materials, and institutional records in this analysis. I access primary sources associated with contemporary music by analyzing audio and video recordings as well as conducting oral histories. Additionally, I use the ethnomusicological fieldwork technique of participant-observation to study tango in its Buenos Aires setting with the intention of gaining a more comprehensive interpretation of Piazzolla’s Argentine heritage. I base this research on my involvement with the composer’s music for over five years. During this time, I attended copious concerts and collected numerous audio and video recordings as well as manuscripts and literary sources. I also participated in two month-long fieldwork trips in

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Argentina (June 2007 and July 2008) as well as two short fieldwork trips in New York (October 2006 and September 2007).

When comparing audio and video recordings, I treated each recording as an event, in which I attempted to reconstruct Piazzolla’s live performance practices. As such, I compared the musical structure to the manuscript or score and described the technical musical characteristics. In addition, I represented the social contexts of the events by thickly describing the musical gestures or behaviors associated with each recording. Insights into these behaviors are found aurally and visually, but are also described in CD liner notes.

With this analysis, I focus on the recordings of the second Quinteto, namely, *Central Park Concert, La camorra, Montréal Jazz Festival Concert*, and *Tango: Zero Hour*. Both Piazzolla and reception history viewed these recordings as the pinnacle of his career. Piazzolla states in the liner notes accompanying *Tango: Zero Hour*: “[Tango: Zero Hour is] the greatest record I’ve made in my entire life. We gave our souls to [it]. This is the record I can give to my grandchildren and say, ‘This is what we did with our lives’” Piazzolla later states that *La camorra* is his favorite recording.

In addition to examining Piazzolla’s recordings, I analyzed recordings and live performances in both the United States and Argentina of contemporary interpreters of his music. This includes recordings and performances of Piazzolla’s former colleagues such as Horacio Ferrer, Gerardo Gandini, Fernando Suárez Paz and Pablo Ziegler as well as

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36 Gorin, *Astor Piazzolla*, 82.
contemporary interpretations of Piazzolla’s music by musicians who specialize in different genres. I studied the performances of Damián Bolotín’s quartet and the ensembles of María José Mentana, both contemporary Argentine tango musicians. I also analyzed the performances and recordings of Yo-Yo Ma, Gidon Kramer, Gotham Chamber Opera, and Gary Burton as well as numerous other performances in the United States.

Additionally, I employed the technique of participant-observation in my discussion of performance practices. While in Argentina, I studied piano and tango with traditional and contemporary tangueros (tango musicians) at the Academia Nacional del Tango in Buenos Aires. I engaged in musical and literal dialogues with a variety of musicians, students, and culture-bearers. I attended numerous tango concerts and milongas (dancing tango events). With the technique of participant-observation, I studied the musical gestures that are inherent in tango and strove to describe these gestures with a “thick description” to interpret their Argentine cultural significance. Furthermore, it was my goal to gain a holistic interpretation of tango and according to Feld’s concept, to alter my musical background in order to attain an alternative perspective into Piazzolla’s music.

In the following chapters of this thesis, I offer an analysis of the performance practices of Piazzolla based on video and audio recordings as well as manuscript sources; however, I also discuss the cultural context of Piazzolla’s music predicated on my own personal experiences and dialogues with music, people, and culture in the United States and Argentina. Chapter 2 provides the reader with a framework from which Piazzolla established the nuevo tango, discussing the history and aesthetics of the genre. In
Chapter 3, I examine Piazzolla’s role within the history of the tango. Chapter 4 analyzes the behaviors associated with this genre and the gestures involved in the music making process. I discuss specific performance practice elements, such as articulation, improvisation, and rubato as well as offer performance practice suggestions to the contemporary performer of Piazzolla’s works. I conclude by discussing *nuevo tango* as an embodiment of Argentine culture.

Due to the many disciplines associated with the tango art form, this thesis has limitations in its scope. First, it will only discuss the musical aspects of *nuevo tango* as Piazzolla conceived them. Currently, *nuevo tango* is a dance form as well as a musical genre, but this thesis does not discuss the relationship between dance and music. Second, the perspective that I offer is unique to my own background as a U.S. musicologist as well as a classically trained pianist and violist.

With this thesis, I seek to aid musicians and scholars in their study of Piazzolla’s music. Moreover, I attempt to provide a model for the study of contemporary performance practices, one that integrates disciplines and encompasses a multidimensional approach. It is my goal to engage in a conversation with scholars, musicians, and Piazzolla aficionados, and ultimately to heighten the awareness of his music as well as to foster a cross-cultural, holistic dialogue necessary to achieve a deeper understanding of the contemporary performance practices that inform his works.
Overlooking *Avenida Libertador* in Buenos Aires is a mural containing a large portrait of the famous tango singer and an early influence on Piazzolla, Carlos Gardel (c.1884-1935) (see Figure 2.1). In this iconic painting, Gardel is smiling over his city,

Figure 2.1. Mural of Carlos Gardel by Carlos Páez Vilaró (1989). Printed by Permission of the Artist.

Buenos Aires. Robert Farris Thompson analyzes this mural in the opening of his book *Tango: The Art History of Love*, and when discussing Gardel’s enigmatic gaze, he states: “The smile of Gardel is a challenge.”³⁷ He then adds his own caption to the image: “If

you want to understand me, master the message of my city.”38 In other words, if one wants to comprehend Gardel and more broadly the music he created, then one must understand the history of the tango, and this history resides in the culture of Buenos Aires. One could also extend this condition to the understanding of Piazzolla, whose music likewise embodies and signifies the characteristics of the Argentine capital city’s culture.

This chapter provides a brief historical introduction to the tango from its inception to the 1940s, when Piazzolla began to transform the genre. It does not and cannot discuss the entire complex history of this art form. Rather, the chapter aims to impart the essential aesthetics and genre transformations that influenced Piazzolla’s compositional output and specifically his performance practices. Further, it strives to provide the historical and cultural contexts from which the composer produced the revolutionary nuevo tango.

The Birth of the Tango in the Cultural Melting Pot of Buenos Aires

At the turn of the twentieth century, Argentina experienced mass immigration due to the potential economic progress of the country. Between 1869 and 1914, the nation increased its total population by seven million, and Buenos Aires went from 180,000 to 1.5 million inhabitants.39 Like Piazzolla’s grandparents, who immigrated from the cities

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38 Ibid.

of Trani and Lucca, Italy, the new inhabitants during this period came primarily from Spain and Italy.\(^{40}\)

Thus, Buenos Aires evolved into a melting pot of cultures, or as the Argentine historian José Luis Romero describes it, Buenos Aires became an “alluvial” society.\(^{41}\) New inhabitants functioned as deposited sediments, which ultimately changed the cultural landscape of Argentina. In effect, the immigrants redefined the identity of a *porteño* (a person living in the capital port city). Luis Alberto Romero, a contemporary Argentine scholar and son of the historian José Luis Romero, states: “[Immigration] allowed for the spontaneous integration of cultural traditions and the emergence of hybrid cultural expressions of great creativity, such as the tango … in which creole influences and the diverse contributions of the immigrants came together.”\(^{42}\)

Immigrants settled in various neighborhoods or *barrios* throughout Buenos Aires depending on their economic status. The wealthier immigrants inhabited the north portion of the city close to the City Centre, while the poorer settled in the south. Immigrants also established themselves in the outskirts of the city or the *arrabales*, which were the most impoverished sections of the city. Those outer sections of Buenos Aires provided a stark contrast to the metropolitan and chic City Centre. The American early tango scholar Simon Collier describes the *arrabal* as consisting of “muddy streets, modest houses, shacks and workshops … its focal point being the municipal


slaughterhouse.”43 In essence, the slaughterhouse and more broadly the *arrabales* became the bridge between the *pampas* (the vast and fertile countryside located outside of Buenos Aires), which cultivated food for the nation, and the metropolitan city, which overflowed with new inhabitants.

One figure associated with the dichotomy between the city and the surrounding countryside is the *compadre*, a man who herded cattle from the *pampas* to the slaughterhouse. Some scholars view this figure as a displacement of the *gaucho* (nineteenth-century equestrian figure associated with the *pampas*). With industrialization, the *gaucho* lost his lifestyle due to the spread of ranches, railways, and barbed-wire fences across his open land.44 Although the traditional *gaucho* world ended at the turn of the twentieth century, the *compadre* assimilated and emulated *gaucho* characteristics such as fierce independence, masculine pride, and a strong inclination to settle affairs of honor with a knife.45

The *compadre*’s underground relative was the *compadrito*. This figure was often a native-born Argentine who imitated the attitudes of the *gaucho*, but he did so to a negative extreme. Julie Taylor describes the *compadrito* as a skillful and valiant fighter, similar to the *compadre*, but he was also a robber, and, at times, a killer.46 The *compadrito* was lazy and dishonest, yet exciting and attractive to women. This figure mimicked and mocked the upper classes of the City Centre through his dress and postures. He wore stylish clothes with a hat, neckerchief, and high-heeled boots, while

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44 Ibid., 37.

45 Ibid.

posing in affluent stances. However, he always carried a knife, a necessity for the urban fighter, and he spoke a dialect called _lunfardo_, which fused rioplatense Spanish with Italian words and inflections.

Like the _gaUCHo_, the _compadrito_ represented himself through song and dance. The art form that the _compadrito_ assimilated from the _gaUCHo_ was the _milonga_. This genre originated as a song form (_milonga canción_) and reflected the melancholic life of the _gaUCHo_ and later the _compadrito_. The _milonga canción_ is often a slow song with a descending melodic theme in a minor key. The rhythmic pattern associated with this genre is a dotted eighth note, sixteenth note, followed by two eighth notes in a 2/4 time signature, which is also the rhythmic pattern of the _habanera_ (see Musical Example 2.1).47

Musical Example 2.1. _Milonga_ Rhythmic Pattern in a 2/4 Time Signature.

Notably, the genre also developed as a faster dance form (_milonga bailando_), and as such, the tempo increased.

Besides the _milonga_, the _compadrito_ engaged in another art form, the tango. The exact origins of the tango are unknown and regularly disputed by scholars. This controversy is due in part to the variety of art forms that took place in the cosmopolitan Río de la Plata region at the end of the nineteenth century. Both the song genre (_tango canción_) and the dance genre (_tango bailando_) coexisted along with forms of the older

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47 Scholars usually notate this pattern in a 2/4 time signature; however, it is also occasionally represented by a 4/8 time signature.
siblings, the milonga, candombe, and habanera. It is clear, however, that tango is a fusion of immigrant musical forms, and during its primal stages, was associated with the compadrito. Moreover, scholars agree that performances took place in bordellos (brothels) of the early arrabales in Buenos Aires (and Montevideo) and represented sexual as well as taboo themes associated with this underground world.

One early sung tango that depicts the life of prostitution is “Dáme la lata” (Give me the token). In the early bordellos, a man purchased la lata (the token) at the door and then presented it to a prostitute in exchange for a dance. The woman kept her earned tokens for the remainder of the evening. However, eventually she was forced to surrender them to her boss, or colloquially her pimp, who then commanded: “Dáme la lata” (Give me the token).48

Tangos dating from the inception of the genre also reflected the compadrito’s courage and honor, which was portrayed through a duelo criollo (knife fight). Two images were often associated with this knife fight: compadritos fighting over a female in a bordello or having a gaucho-like duel on a Buenos Aires street corner.49 When describing the duelo criollo, Jeffery Tobin writes: “One image is in a brothel in Buenos Aires. Extravagantly-dressed men dance the tango with a barely-dressed woman. A fight breaks out over one of the women, leading two of the men to perform a choreographed knife fight.”50 However, the duelo criollo was more complex than two compadritos

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49 The gaucho, similar to the compadrito, represented his life through song and dance. Many of these performing acts were displayed through competitions, either vocally with words (payadas) or physically with footwork (malambos).

fighting over a female. It also included the traditional *gaucho* themes of competing for honor as well as the undercurrents of the immigrant’s struggle to achieve social status in the new melting pot of Buenos Aires.\(^{51}\)

The celebrated Argentine author who influenced Piazzolla, Jorge Luis Borges, emphasizes the *duelo criollo* in his historical essays on the tango.\(^{52}\) He describes this as an epic fight, one of celebration. Borges states: “To speak of the ‘fighting tango’ is not strong enough; I would say that the tango and the *milonga* directly express a conviction that poets have often tried to voice with words: that a fight can be a celebration.”\(^{53}\) He also refers to the *duelo criollo* in his 1964 poem “El Tango.”

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\begin{align*}
\text{Que solo es tiempo. El tango crea un turbio} \\
\text{Pasado irreal que de algún modo es cierto,} \\
\text{Un recuerdo imposible de haber muerto} \\
\text{Peleando, en una esquina del suburbia.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{It is only time. Tango creates a disturbed} \\
\text{Unreal past that in some way is certain,} \\
\text{An impossible memory of having died} \\
\text{Fighting, on a suburban street corner.}\(^{54}\)
\end{align*}
\]

Ultimately, Borges argues that the tango’s mission is “to give Argentines the belief in a brave past, having met the demands of honor and bravery.”\(^{55}\)


\(^{55}\) Borges, *Selected Non-Fiction*, 397.
The guardia vieja (Old Guard): 1890-1917

By the turn of the twentieth century, the tango spread from the arrabales to the City Centre and became an enduring part of popular culture in Buenos Aires. As such, its history can be divided into three periods: 1) guardia vieja (Old Guard), 1890-1917; 2) guardia nueva (New Guard), 1917-1955; and 3) nuevo tango (New Tango), 1955-present. While it remained a cultural representation of the compadrito, the tango matured throughout its history into a refined art form to which immigrants and eventually all porteños could relate their story. María Susana Azzi states: “The tango itself is a multivocal experience, which tells the story of many different people.”^56 Themes of tangos include elements of unrequited love, passion, nostalgia, honor, and bravery.

With the guardia vieja, the tango made an initial surge into popular culture. Immigrants began dancing and singing this expressive form in the patios or courtyards of the conventillos (tenement houses) as well as in more sophisticated cafés. Musicians formed ensembles and performed in establishments devoted to tango music and/or dance. Famous composers and pieces arose and became a part of the traditional tango repertoire. These works include: “El choclo” (Corn) (1905) by Ángel Villoldo, “La morocha” (The Dark-Haired Girl) (1905) by Enrique Saborido, “Ojos negros” (Black Eyes) by Vicente Greco, “Armenoville” (ca. 1912) by Juan Maglio, “Vicentito” (1912) by Agustín Bardi, “Marejada” (Swell of the Sea) (1913) by Roberto Firpo, “La cumparsita” (The Little

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Masked Parade) (1917) by Gerardo Matos Rodríguez, and “Comme il faut” (As It Should Be) (1917) by Eduardo Arolas.57

With the popularity and spread of sheet music and the phonograph, tango works became accessible to the mass public. In addition, many composers successfully published piano arrangements of their works, which contributed to the popularity of the genre. For example, Simon Collier states that “La morocha” sold more than 100,000 copies during the early 1900s.58 In 1911, Columbia Records signed Vicente Greco in Buenos Aires as well as other bandleaders to record tango compositions. With the advent of the phonograph, the tango was not just a dance, but instrumental music to which people listened. Jorge Novati states that music became more than just a dance accompaniment; it began to be perceived as a type of music to which one listens.59 The phonograph, in turn, provided an acceptable environment (disconnected from the bordello context of the earliest tangos) to appreciate the genre.60

By the 1910s, composers established tango as a musical genre with standardized instrumentation, orchestration, structure, and rhythmic foundation. The orquesta típica (typical tango orchestra) consisted of violin, flute, guitar, and bandoneón.61 With this

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57 During the 1910s, there was a strong connection between Buenos Aires and Paris; therefore, it was not uncommon to have titles in French.
60 Ibid.
61 The bandoneón later becomes synonymous with the tango and is Piazzolla’s instrument. It originated in Germany during the nineteenth century and was often used as an organ substitute in small German churches. Originally, Heinrich Band conceived the instrument to be played in only a few keys. As the instrument developed, more buttons were added; however, the buttons were not always added logically. Consequently, the instrument contains thirty-eight keys on the right side and thirty-three keys on the left side, none of which correspond horizontally or vertically to a diatonic or chromatic scale. This makes the instrument very difficult to master.
instrumentation, the violin and the bandoneón often played the melody in unison while the flute occasionally embellished the melodic line and the guitar accompanied it. Pablo Aslan, in his master’s thesis, states that the bandoneonista, according to his ability, also utilized his left hand to play chords and provided bridges during melodic breaks. The instrumentation and orchestration varied slightly as the genre progressed and depended on the specific tango ensemble; for example, Greco’s 1911 recordings of the orquesta típica criollo consisted of two bandoneones, two violins, piano, and flute. In this case, the doubled instruments played in unison, and the piano replaced the guitar. Early tangos used a three-part form (ABC), for example, AABBACA or AABBCCCAB with C functioning as a trio. Notably, many of the repetitions of A were improvised or played, according to tangueros, a la parrilla. The rhythmic foundation consisted of a dotted-eighth, sixteenth, and two eighth notes in a 2/4 time signature, which is similar to the older milonga genre (see Musical Example 2.1).

During the 1910s, tango traveled across the Atlantic Ocean to France, where it captured the imagination of the Parisian aristocracy. Le grand monde (the Parisian upper class) refined the genre to match their tastes as well as renaming it the “tango argentino.” By 1913, “Tangomania” had taken over Paris and Europe; all classes of society were dancing tango as well as purchasing clothing and perfume named after it. As such, the gentry of Buenos Aires reclaimed the transformed risqué art form of its bordellos and

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63 This use of the term a la parrilla implies improvisation in tango. Tangueros use the word to refer to playing in “jam session” or working with a mere musical sketch or lead sheet. In essence, tangueros use a la parrilla in a similar fashion to the common meaning of the term, “a barbeque.” Tangueros, in this sense, throw the music (or the meat) on the grill and see what comes out.

64 Artemis Cooper, “Tangomania in Europe and North America” in ¡Tango! The Dance, the Song, and the Story, ed. Simon Collier (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 77.
catapulted the tango into the height of its popularity in what was known as “The Golden Age.”

**The guardia nueva (The New Guard): 1920-1955**

Tango became the cultural icon of Buenos Aires during the 1920s. All members of society enjoyed it as a dance and as a musical art form in *salones de baile* (upper-class dance halls), *milongas* (dance halls), and cabarets, as well as in cafés, bars, silent-movie theaters, and on the radio. Both the *tango canción* and the instrumental tango flourished in the works of musicians such as Carlos Gardel, Julio De Caro, and Aníbal Troilo. Poets also expanded tango themes to include sentiments of sadness and nostalgia.

**Carlos Gardel**

If tango is an icon of Buenos Aires, then Gardel is a personification of the *ideal porteño.*65 His portrayal of the *compadrito’s* life provided a voice to which all members of Buenos Aires could relate their stories. Musically, he established the characteristics of the *tango canción*, which were modeled for many generations. Horacio Ferrer in his description of the history and evolution of the tango states:

*[Gardel] with absolute exclusivity, set all the rules … that were adopted in this type of tango: the way one approaches the lyrics … [and] the way to impose sentences; his way of singing music and lyrics remained perfectly in place for forty years after its first creative inception.*66

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66 “A él corresponde, con absoluta exclusividad, fijar todas las normas—que en material de canto—se han de adoptar para esa especialidad dentro del tango: su manera de encarar la letra argumentada—desde sus primeras intervenciones como solista—el modo que él impuso para frasearla, su manera de decir música y letra siguen perfectamente vigentes cuarenta años después de su primicia creativa.” Horacio Ferrer, *El tango: su historia y evolución* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Continente, 1990), 75.
With “Mi noche triste” (My Sad Night) in 1917, Gardel achieved his first success as a tango singer and began developing the theme of *tristeza*. Often the *compadrito* would feel *tristeza* due to unhappy or unrequited love affairs. The betrayal and/or abandonment by the *milonguita* (female tango dancer) during this affair was always the cause of the *compadrito*’s *tristeza*. “Mi noche triste” offers a characteristic example of a *milonguita*’s desertion.

¡Percanta que me amuraste
en lo mejor de mi vida
dejándome el alma herida
y espinas en el corazón…!
¡Sabiendo que te quería,
que vos eras me alegría
y mi sueño abrasador…!
Para mi ya no hay consuelo
y por eso me encurde lo
pa’ olvidarme de tu amor.

Lover, that you abandoned me
in the best [time] of my life
leaving my soul injured
and thorns in my heart…!
Knowing that I loved you,
that you were my happiness
and my steamy dream…!
There’s no consolation for me
and that’s why I am drunk,
to forget your love.”

In the first four lines of the poem, the *compadrito* establishes *tristeza* by describing the brutality of the *milonguita*’s abandonment.

Similar to *tristeza* is the concept of *mufarse*, which is also present in “Mi noche triste.” This *lunfardo* word translates as “to mope” or “to be upset,” but it also includes the idea of “to willingly surrender to one’s suffering.” As Julie Taylor notes: “[Mufarse] is the entire complex of actions and emotions involved in sitting alone at a table with a drink, sipping it slowly while contemplating the totality of one’s misfortunes and underlying basic bad luck, and enjoying oneself.” In the case of “Mi noche triste,” the *compadrito* is love-stricken and disconsolate because the *milonguita* has rejected him;

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therefore, he surrenders himself to his misfortune through intoxication. This is evident at the end of the poem when the *compadrito* states: “There’s no consolation for me / and that’s why I am drunk, / to forget your love.”

Another idea associated with the Gardelian tango is *nostalgia*. This theme encompasses the ideas that the *compadrito* will eventually return to his *barrio* or even his homeland. In this concept, a man is often lured away from the *barrio* by the dream of an increased social status or by the love of a woman. However, the *compadrito* always yearns for his former life, and it is his goal to return eventually. Perhaps the most famous *tango canción* describing this theme is “Mi Buenos Aires querido” (My Dear Buenos Aires), which was popularized by Gardel. In this poem the *compadrito*, or more autobiographically Gardel, feels a sense of *nostalgia* for having left Buenos Aires and expresses his hope to return.

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Mi Buenos Aires
tienda querida
donde mi vida terminaré.
Bajo tu amparo
no hay desengaños
vuelan los años,
se olvida el dolor…

En caravana
los recuerdos pasan
con una estela
dulce de emoción.
Quiero que sepas
que al evocarte
se van las
penas
del corazón.

... Mi Buenos Aires querido

... cuando yo te vuelva a ver
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My Buenos Aires
dear land,
where my life will end.
Under your protection
there’s no disappointments,
the years fly,
the pain’s forgotten…

In a caravan
the memories pass by
with a trail
sweet of emotion.
I want you to know
that when I remember you
the pains leave
my heart.

... My dear Buenos Aires

when I’ll see you again
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no habrá más penas ni olvido. there will be no more pain or forgetting.  

Gardel achieved success and popularity due to the manner in which he musically portrayed tristeza, mufarse and nostalgia. With his baritone voice, he employed a rubato that corresponded to the natural speaking patterns of the poetic phrases, while emphasizing the dramatic expression. Scholars also believe that Gardel accentuated the use of rubato because he could not read music. Therefore, he was not bound to the exact rhythms of a musical score. Martín Kutnowski states:

His [Gardel’s] lack of formal musical education, as well as the lack of formal education of most singers of this time, must be understood as an advantage rather than a limitation: it allowed him to improvise in such a way that, in expressing the weight and meaning of the words, justified distorting the original scores.  

For example, Gardel begins “Mi Buenos Aires querido” slowly, emphasizing each syllable; thus, the listener can interpret his affection and sentiment for his Buenos Aires. Another noteworthy example of Gardel’s use of rubato is in “Por una cabeza” (By a Head), in which he again dramatizes the opening lyrics to illustrate the meaning of the text.

In addition, Gardel’s music often contains a descending melodic line, which accentuates the tristeza quality. This is evident in “Mi Buenos Aires querido” as well (see Musical Example 2.2). Notably, this descending melodic line is not unique to Gardel, but is an influence of the milonga canción tradition of the gaucho. In this earlier

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70 “Su falta de educación musical formal, así como la de la mayor parte de los cantantes de nuestra época, debe ser vista como ventaja más que como limitación: le permitía improvisar de manera tal que la distorsión de las partituras originales quedara justificada por la expresión del peso y el sentido de las palabras.” Martín Kutnowski, “Rubato instrumental y estructura de la frase en la música de Astor Piazzolla,” in Estudios sobre la obra de Astor Piazzolla, ed. Omar García Brunelli (Buenos Aires: Gourmet Musical Ediciones, 2008), 99-108.
genre, the *gaucho* would sing in a slow, *tristeza* manner and reminisce over his vanishing rural life. In essence, Gardel is incorporating a *gaucho*-like tradition or folk tradition into *tango canción*.

Musical Example 2.2. Descending Melodic Line in “Mi Buenos Aires querido.”

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Gardel toured the world singing tango in concerts as well as making recordings and movies. He performed in Argentina, Uruguay, Spain, France, and the United States. During this period, he starred in seven films, four of which were made in the United States. Gardel’s period in the United States was when the young Piazzolla, who was raised in New York, encountered the international tango singer.

Through a delivery of a present to Gardel from Piazzolla’s father, Piazzolla met Gardel. After their initial encounter, they established a relationship based on the young boy’s assisting Gardel in his daily activities such as shopping (a difficult task for the non-English speaker in the United States). Piazzolla’s talent on the bandoneón was soon demonstrated and he began accompanying Gardel and supplying music for private parties of the movie star.71 In 1935, Gardel gave the young Piazzolla a small role in the movie *El día que me quieras* (*The Day That You Love Me*). Later that year, Gardel left New York.
York to tour the Caribbean and tragically died in a plane crash. Azzi states in her biography on Piazzolla that Gardel wanted Piazzolla to travel with him, but Piazzolla’s parents forbade it. 72 She further notes that Piazzolla had stated in a letter: “[If I had gone], I would now be playing the harp, not the bandoneón.”73

In 1936, Gardel’s body returned to Buenos Aires via ship, and his legacy, including his smile, was immortalized. The famous and venerable Argentine saying is that their hero “sings better every day.”74 Next to Gardel’s tomb at the Cementerio de la Chacarita Buenos Aires stands a life-size bronze statue of the Argentine legend smiling at his mourners. Argentines refer to this statue as “the bronze that smiles.” For them, the smile indicates the hope for a better life, “a promise of the return of better social conditions.”75 In this case, Gardel’s smile seen looming over Avenida Libertador, or elsewhere greeting visitors at his tomb, is not as enigmatic to the porteño, as it perhaps is to the foreign observer.

**Julio De Caro and his Sextet**

Violinist Julio De Caro (1899-1980) was to the development of instrumental tango as Gardel was to the advancement of the *tango canción*. In 1924, De Caro assembled his innovative *Sexteto*, which initiated the first major transformation in tango ensembles and introduced an overall style of playing referred to as the *escuela decareana* (the De Caro school of playing). The performance practices of Julio De Caro and his

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72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 In Spanish, the Argentine saying is “Carlitos canta mejor cada día.”

Sexteto also influenced many of its successors, including Piazzolla. Gabriela Mauriño states: “Their contribution [De Caro’s Sexteto] begins an evolutionary school that will later lay the foundation for the cutting edge or the vanguard.” 76

By the 1920s, tangueros, including De Caro and other musicians such as Roberto Firpo (1884-1969) and Juan Carlos Cobián (1896-1953), had moved from the previous orquesta típica to the sexteto típico. This new ensemble arrangement consisted of two violins, two bandoneones, piano, and bass. With this instrumentation, the violins and bandoneones played the melody, and the piano and bass supplied the harmony as well as the rhythmic foundation.

Tangueros and historians acknowledge De Caro’s Sexteto for developing the rhythm, accentuation, extended techniques, and virtuosity of the sexteto típico. As stated by Piazzolla: “He [De Caro] redeemed for me what was most important: the matter of rhythm, taste. Above all, [he reinvigorated] the rhythm, the percussion, [and] the accentuation, which for me is the most important in the interpretation of tango; it gives it the swing.” 77 In other words, through rhythm, accentuation, percussive techniques and the relationship between them, De Caro’s Sexteto established what tangueros colloquially refer to as “tango swing,” the essence of tango music.

Different from “jazz swing” of the United States, tango swing refers to a rhythmic and accent pattern that one can characterize by the use of arrastre. Literally, this word


77 “De la época decareana y he rescatado para mí lo que era más importante: la cosa rítmica, el sabor. Sobre todo, lo rítmico, la percusión, la acentuación, que para mí es lo más importante de la interpretación del tango, lo que le da swing.” Alberto Speratti, Con Piazzolla (Buenos Aires: Galerna, Colección Testimonios, 1969), 97.
means “dragging” and musically, it gives the listener an impression of a slow arrival to the downbeat. However, the actual downbeat is in tempo and on time. The creator and director of the *Orquesta Escuela de Tango Emilio Balcarce*, Ignacio Varchausky states:

The *arrastre* is generally played with a slight delay [*retraso*] with respect to the tempo of the piece. This generates a feeling of expectation and desire, almost physical in quality, for the *arrastre* to reach the last note and return to correct time. This delay in execution, when realized, makes the work swing in tango terms.\(^{78}\)

On the bandoneón, the musician begins the note before the beat and the downbeat is articulated with the opening of the bellows of the bandoneón. Thompson describes this sound phonetically in English. He states: “When vocally approximating the sound of an *arrastre*, *tangueros* often use *s* as it sounds in the word *pleasure* or in extensions of *z*, because these voiced consonants have a vibrating buzz: *zep, zoom, zum, zhook*.\(^{79}\)

Musicians can also imitate this technique on stringed instruments and the piano. On stringed instruments, *arrastre* is a slide with the left hand. In addition, the right hand increases and then decreases the bow pressure in the middle of the *arrastre*; thus, dynamically, there is a small *crescendo* and *diminuendo* in an *arrastre*. On the piano, the musician imitates the the bandoneón and the stringed instruments by playing a small ascending scale in the left hand prior to the beat. On the beat, the musician lands on the principal note. Notably, this scale resembles a series of grace notes more than a “classical” scale; the notes are not clear and precise, but rather pushed together to create a blurred effect.

In terms of rhythm, De Caro’s *Sexteto* often used two rhythmic patterns, which provide the foundation for his music. The first pattern is four quarter notes per measure


\(^{79}\) Ibid., 183.
in a 4/4 time signature with accents on the first and third beats, known as *marcato* or *marcato en quatro* (*marcato* in four). In addition to functioning as a rhythmic technique, *marcato* has harmonic and melodic implications. First, *marcato* in the bass (or the left hand of the pianist) outlines the harmony through arpeggiated chords or a walking bass line. Melodically, in the right hand of the pianist, *marcato* emphasizes a descending melodic line, which is characteristic of the *milonga canción* tradition (see Musical Example 2.3).


![Piano sheet music](image)

Notably, musicians often use *arrastre* to accentuate the *marcato* pattern further.

De Caro’s *Sexteto* also derives a rhythmic figure from the *milonga*. In this case, the rhythm is a dotted eighth note, a sixteenth note tied to an eighth note, and another eighth note. This rhythmic pattern, known as the *tresillo*, can be expanded into a 4/4 time signature, in which accents are placed on the first, fourth, and seventh eighth notes (see Musical Examples 2.4 and 2.5). Mauriño notes that De Caro and later Alfredo Gobbi (1912-1965) use this 3+3+2 pattern; however, they used it sparingly.⁸⁰ Eventually, this

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pattern becomes closely associated with the bordoneos of Orlando Goñi (a member of Aníbal Troilo’s orchestra) and emerges as the signature rhythmic figure of Piazzolla.

Musical Example 2.4. Tresillo Derived from the milonga Rhythmic Pattern.

De Caro, a violinist himself, also employed numerous percussive effects on the violin that influenced Piazzolla. Interestingly, his tango ensembles did not contain drums or any typical percussion instruments; therefore, the musicians had to supply these special effects. One example for violin is lija (sandpaper), or sometimes referred to as chicharra. In this technique, the violinist plays on the D string, behind the bridge with the bow at the frog. In lija, the violinist creates a scratching-like sound similar to its name, sandpaper. Another percussive violin technique is tambor (snare drum). This occurs when the violinist places the middle finger (the second finger in violin terminology) of the left hand between the G and D string. The right hand then plucks the G string approximately one fourth of the way up the fingerboard from the tailpiece. This creates a very secco (dry) pizzicato. A sound similar to tambor is golpe (hit/knock), in
which the violinist hits the body of the instrument. In *golpe*, the left hand is in fifth position with the thumb behind the neck, and the middle finger of the left hand strikes the body of the violin.\(^{81}\)

The bassist Leopoldo Thompson (1890-1925) also used various percussive effects in De Caro’s *Sexteto*. Similar to the *golpe*, Thompson employed a technique called *bombo*, in which he hit the side of the instrument. Additionally, he began establishing the technique known today as *strappato*. In this technique, contemporary bassists hit the strings with the bow, similar to *col legno* before the downbeat, stop the sound on the strings with the left hand on the downbeat, and hit the back of the instrument with the left hand on beat two.

The element of virtuosity was another important contribution of De Caro’s *Sexteto*. The variations of the A theme were more technically difficult than the music of the previous generation and often increased in virtuosity, as the piece progressed. The overall texture of the works were more polyphonic, due to the second violinist and even the pianist playing countermelodies. In addition, the melodic instruments employed classical embellishments, such as mordents and trills. The piano also supplied more virtuosic *rellenos* (fills) during the melodic breaks.\(^{82}\)

The *bandoneonistas* in De Caro’s *Sexteto*, Pedro Maffía (1900-1967) and Pedro Laurenz (1902-1972), further contributed to this new style of playing and eventually shaped the performance practices of Aníbal Troilo and later Piazzolla. First, Maffía was exceptional at executing a melody in his right hand and accompanying this melody with

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\(^{81}\) The information in this paragraph and the following paragraph was ascertained through fieldwork experiences in Buenos Aires with contemporary *tangueros*.

his left hand. This is extremely difficult considering that the two keyboards of the instrument are different and arranged randomly. Second, Maffia possessed a slow, softer, and more legato style of playing. This allowed the bandoneón to achieve great expression, parallel to that of Gardel’s singing. “Laurenz,” as stated by Mauriño, “possessed a style with which Piazzolla identified himself: a characteristic sharp phrasing, a brilliant sound and a forceful attack.”\(^{83}\) Piazzolla had such an admiration for the recordings of these two bandonenoistas that he wrote “Pedro y Pedro” (1981) in their honor.

**The Thirties**

The 1930s, referred to by historians as the “infamous decade,” brought political, economic, and social changes to Argentina, which in turn affected the development of the tango. Economic prosperity and hopefulness for a new future ended with Black Tuesday, the stock market crash of 1929 in the United States. This crisis gave impetus to a worldwide Great Depression, which greatly altered the export-based economy of Argentina. In order to solve the economic problems of the country, a military coup overthrew the democratic government of Hipólito Yrigoyen and on September 6, 1930 General José Félix Uriburu assumed power. This *coup d’état* began a period of political unrest, and as Luis Alberto Romero states: “It would be another sixty-one years before an elected president would peacefully transfer power to his successor.”\(^{84}\)

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\(^{83}\) “Pedro Laurenz … poseía un estilo con el que Piazzolla se identificaba más: un característico fraseo ‘cortante,’ un sonido con brillo y fuerza de ataque.” Gabriela Mauriño, “Raíces tangueras de la obra de Astor Piazzolla,” 23.

During this period, tango became a reflection of the Argentine sentiments of uncertainty and disillusionment. The tangos of Enrique Santos Discépolo (1901-1951) are the greatest representation of this “infamous decade,” specifically his tango “Cambalache” (Bizarre) (1934).

Que el mundo fue
y será una porquería, ya lo sé.
En el quinientos seis
y en el dos mil, también.
Que siempre ha habido chorros,
maquiavelos y estafaos,
contentos y amargaos,
varones y dublé.
Pero que el siglo veinte
es un despliegue
de maldá insolente
ya no hay quien lo niegue.
Vivimos revoclaos en un meringue
y en el mismo lodo
todos manoseaos.

¡Qué falta de respeto,
qué atropello a la razón!
Cualquiera es un señor,
cualquiera es un ladrón…
Mezclao con Stavisky
va Don Bosco y La Mignon,
Don Chicho y Napoleón,
Carrera y San Martín…
Igual que en la vidriera irrespetuosa
de los cambalaches
se ha mezclao la vida,
y herida por un sable
sin remaches
ves llorar la Biblia
junto a un calefón.

That the world was
and will be rubbish, I already know.
In five hundred and six
and two thousand, also.
That there’s always been thieves,
traitors and victims of fraud,
happy and bitter,
men and imitations.
But, that the twentieth century
is a display
of insolent malice
no one denies it.
We live sunk in a meringue
and in the same mud
all well-worn.

What a lack of respect,
what a way to run over reason!
Anybody is a gentleman,
anybody is a thief…
Mixed with Stavisky,
go Don Bosco and La Mignon,
Don Chicho and Napoleon,
Carrera and San Martín…
As in the shop window
disrespectful
of the bazaars
life is mixed up
and wounded by a sword
without rivets
you can see a Bible crying
next to a water heater.  

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In this tango, Discépolo expresses his disenchantment with government and society by rather grotesquely stating that the world is rubbish or trash and that nobody is exempt from living at this low, “muddy” level. All men are the same now, even swindlers (Stavisky), Catholic priests (Don Bosco), lovers (La Mignon), Mafia members (Don Chicho), military leaders and conquerors (Napoleon), famous boxers (Carnera), and patriot generals, including the exalted Argentine general, San Martín. Society lacks morals and the “Bible is crying” in the closet, next to the water heater.

Tango musicians also suffered from the economic hardships of the 1930s. With the emergence of sound in movies during the late 1920s, tango orchestras no longer functioned as live background music to silent films. Many tango entertainment venues, such as theaters and cafés, could not financially support themselves and collapsed. However, the radio provided a means to disseminate tango to a large audience and offered a source of employment for tango orchestras.\(^{86}\)

During this period, tango divided into two styles: one returning to a traditional steady, danceable tango and the other continuing the evolutionary escuela decareana. During this period, the public favored the more danceable tango, which was led by the “King of Rhythm,” Juan D’Arienzo (1900-1976). His style, popularized by the radio, emphasized a lively tempo and a steady beat, both characteristics of dance music. However, the latter approach influenced Piazzolla’s predecessors as well as Piazzolla himself. A later representative of the escuela decareana was the sextet of Elvino Vardaro (1905-1971) and Osvaldo Pugliese (1905-1995). While this group did not make

recordings, it was highly influential in developing musicians of the next great wave of the “Golden Era,” namely, Pugliese himself as well as Aníbal Troilo (1914-1975).

Osvaldo Pugliese

In 1939, Pugliese established his own orchestra, which developed its unique style within the framework established by De Caro. His style is what many tangueros refer to as playing “apuliesado.” One attributes this adjective to the onomatopoetic yumba figure exemplified in Pugliese’s famous tango “La yumba.” 87 In this case, all of the instrumental musicians precede beats one and three with elongated arrastres, and the musicians end beats one and three staccato. Thus, the “YUM” sound is created. On beats two and four, Pugliese or the pianist plays the lowest “A” on the piano (A₀) or even a cluster around A₀ indicating the “ba.” Thus, Pugliese creates the sounds “YUM-ba, YUM-ba” with the accent pattern stressing beats one and three. In contemporary contexts, musicians occasionally alter this style by placing more emphasis on the “ba.” Piazzolla does this alteration in his piece “Contrabajissimo.”

Aníbal Troilo

Natives and non-natives often consider the orchestras of Aníbal “Pichuco” Troilo a representation of the typical tango sound. Gorin notes in his biography of Piazzolla: “After Gardel, Troilo was perhaps the iconic figure in classic tango … Troilo himself became a character larger than life, a man seen as embodying the tango ethos.” 88 As a bandoneonista, he incorporated the strengths of his predecessors, such as the lyrical,

87 The “y” in Argentine Spanish is pronounced similar to a French “j” as in “Jacques.” The IPA of “yumba” is [ʒumˈba].

delicate sound of Maffía and the brilliance of Laurenz. As an orchestral leader, he united the most talented instrumentalists, vocalists and arrangers, including bassist Enrique “Kicho” Díaz (1918-1992), pianist Orlando Goñi (1914-1945), singer Francisco Fiorentino (1905-1955), as well as bandoneonista and arranger Astor Piazzolla. Furthermore, as a composer, he created works that are now included in the standard tango repertoire, such as “La ultima curda” (The Last Binge) and “Sur” (South).

At the age of twenty-three, Troilo established his first orchestra, which debuted at the Marabú cabaret on July 1, 1937. Through the late 1930s and 1940s, Troilo’s orchestra secured itself as a premiere tango ensemble. As a bandleader, his career and popularity was sustained throughout his entire life; however, his major contributions to the tango genre and influences on Piazzolla occurred during the years of his early orchestras, specifically those ensembles with Díaz and Goñi.

Inspired by Thompson of De Caro’s Sexteto, Díaz incorporated an arco and percussive style of playing, which became the new standard in tango performance practices. This was in contrast to the pizzicato style, which occurred in D’Arienzo’s group of the 1930s. Aslan states: “Kicho developed the sharp attack with the bow that is now characteristic, as well as the broad glissandos [arrastre] into the first note of each bar.” Also in the style of De Caro’s Sexteto, Díaz uses the percussive effects such as golpe and strappata. Notably, Díaz was a member of Troilo’s early ensembles, but he joined Piazzolla in his endeavors during the 1960s and 1970s, namely in the first Quinteto and Conjunto 9. Furthermore, Piazzolla considered him one of the preeminent

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89 Gabriel Mauriño, “Racíes tangueras de la obra de Astor Piazzolla,” 23.

bassist. He states: “I think he [Díaz] is the father of all bass players. He was a sort of [an] elephant carrying the whole Quintet on his back. His ease in playing was always a delight.”\(^{91}\)

Contemporary tangueros often consider Goñi, the pianist in Troilo’s early ensembles, a legend; Piazzolla even described him as his inspirational angel.\(^{92}\) He also described Goñi’s influence by stating: “Goñi made me crazy jealous. When I was integrated into Pichuco’s orchestra, he put me behind him with a little notebook and I recorded everything he played in order to later imitate him on the bandoneón.”\(^{93}\) As Aslan notes, Goñi was the first pianist to double the bass line with his left hand by playing scales and arpeggios, which supported the accent pattern of the bandoneones.\(^{94}\) Also, he incorporated techniques of syncopation, such as sincopa and bordoneo. In sincopa, the rhythm consists of eighth note, quarter note, eighth note, quarter note, and quarter rest (see Musical Example 2.6 and see Musical Example 2.7 for how this pattern is distributed between the pianist’s hands on the piano).


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\(^{91}\) Natalio Gorin, Astor Piazzolla: A Memoir, 81.

\(^{92}\) “Goñi fue, más que pianista, mi ángel inspirador.” Diana Piazzolla, Astor (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Corregidor, 2005), 214.

\(^{93}\) Goñi me enloquecía. Cuando ya integraba la orquesta de Pichuco, me ponía detrás de él con un cuadernito y anotaba todo lo que él tocaba para después imitarlo en el bandoneón.” Ibid., 115.

Musical Example 2.7. *Sincopa* on the Piano.\(^95\)

\[\text{Musical Example 2.7. Sincopa on the Piano.}\]

_Bordoneo_ is a pattern that resembles guitar playing. In this case, the accompaniment figure is an arpeggiated chord with accents on the first, fourth, and seventh eighth notes of each measure (see Musical Examples 2.8 and 2.9).

Musical Example 2.8. Left Hand _bordoneo_ Figure.

Musical Example 2.9. Left and Right Hand _bordoneo_ Figure.

This creates a _tresillo_ pattern (3+3+2), which Piazzolla further develops.

Piazzolla became a member of Troilo’s orchestra in 1939; moreover, this marks the point at which he started down a path of revolutionizing the tango into a hybrid form

\(^{95}\) This pattern as well as the three following musical examples are based on my lessons with Oscar De Elia.
known as *nuevo tango*. However, the tango’s historical and cultural lineage was neither unknown nor ignored by Piazzolla. He rather embraced this heritage. In his works, he incorporated images of the early *barrios*, Gardel’s expressive style of singing, the percussive effects and other *yeites* of De Caro’s *Sexteto*, and the syncopation of Troilo’s orchestra. Piazzolla affirms these influences in an interview for the BBC DVD titled, *Astor Piazzolla: In Portrait*. He states: “You can find the roots of my music has, in every moment, in every second, you have a little bit—or much of—tango primitive and today … I think that it’s in my blood—I’m a man of tango.”96

Expounding on his intercultural and multilingual background, Piazzolla introduced himself and his music to an audience at New York’s Central Park Bandshell in 1987 by announcing:

This is the new music of Buenos Aires, the new tango. Esta es la música de Buenos Aires, el nuevo tango. Questa è la nuova musica di Buenos Aires, il nuovo tango … We started this music in 1954 … My name is Astor Piazzolla. I was born in Argentina. I was raised in New York and my parents come from Trani, Italia.97

With this statement, Piazzolla set the parameters to identify and understand his music, nuevo tango. He spoke in three languages: English, the language of his audience in New York and Piazzolla’s second language; Spanish, the language of Argentina as well as his first language; and Italian, the language of many immigrants in Buenos Aires who influenced the tango, including Piazzolla’s own family. He also recognized his heritage, which encompassed traditions from Argentina, the United States, and Italy. Through his diverse background and his interdisciplinary training and experiences, he gained the necessary ingredients to create nuevo tango. This chapter provides a broad overview of the life and music of Piazzolla in relationship to his childhood development, compositional output, and artistic endeavors.

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97 Astor Piazzolla, The Central Park Concert, Chesky Records JD 107, recorded in 1987 and released in 1994, CD.
Birth and Childhood

Piazzolla was born in Mar del Plata, Argentina on March 11, 1921 to Vicente (“Nonino”) Piazzolla and Asunta (“Nonina”) Manetti.98 In order to seek a better life, the Piazzolla family moved to New York in 1925. Aside from a brief return to Argentina in 1930, they resided in New York until 1936 and settled in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, which, during the late 1920s, was comprised of primarily Italian and Jewish immigrants. Piazzolla described this neighborhood in his memoirs as dangerous and culturally discordant. He recalled:

In that neighborhood, the clash was between gangster gangs, and they came from every kind: Italians, Jews, Irish. I grew up in that violent climate. That’s why I became a fighter. Perhaps that also marked my music. That kind of stuff gets under your skin.99

While in New York, Piazzolla’s father exposed him to the music of his Argentine origins, specifically the tango.100 Vicente Piazzolla had an admiration for the tangos of Julio De Caro and the guardia nueva. He bought his young son a bandoneón while they lived in New York, and Astor began playing the instrument at age eight. Despite the young Piazzolla’s apparent lack of interest in musical endeavors, he continued to study the instrument at the insistence of his father. In 1934, Piazzolla met the internationally acclaimed tango singer Carlos Gardel, who was in the United States to film movies such as El tango en Broadway (1934), El día

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98 “Nonino” is a derivation of the Italian word “nonno,” which in English translates as “grandfather.” Piazzolla referred to his parents in the same manner as his children did; thus, he called them “Nonino” and “Nonina.” María Susanna Azzi and Simon Collier, Le Grand Tango: The Life and Music of Astor Piazzolla (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 43-44.

99 Piazzolla later in this passage discussed the influence of Jewish Klezmer music on his style, specifically in creating his signature 3+3+2 rhythm. However, I argue that the 3+3+2 rhythm, the tresillo, is a derivation of the milonga rhythmic pattern. Natalio Gorin, Astor Piazzolla: A Memoir, trans. Fernando González (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 2001) 30.

100 Azzi, Le Grand Tango, 8-9.
que me quieras (1935), and Tango Bar (1935). As noted in Chapter 2, the young Piazzolla translated for the international tango star in addition to performing occasional bandoneón accompaniments and playing a small role with him in the film, El día que me quieras.

**Artistic Development (1936-1954)**

In 1936, the family returned to Mar del Plata, Argentina, and Piazzolla, contrary to his childhood attitude, became infatuated with the tango as a teenager. Famous tangueros from the escuela decareana, such as Pedro Laurenz (1902-1972), Pedro Maffía (1900-1967), and Aníbal Troilo (1914-1975) as well as the Elvino Vardaro Sexteto, inspired him. In 1938, he wrote a letter to Elvino Vardaro (1905-1971) that attests to his admiration. Here Piazzolla stated: “I admire not only your orchestra as my favorite but also you as a violinist.”

He continued by elaborating on his appreciation of the ensemble’s melodic phrasings as well as their arrangements and orchestrations.

At the age of eighteen, Piazzolla, full of youthful ambition, moved to Buenos Aires to begin his life as a tanguero. He quickly got a job with Troilo’s orchestra, which, in 1939, was one of the most prominent ensembles of its day. There he played bandoneón with the maestro and eventually began arranging for the group. He described his experience with Troilo’s orchestra as a “tango baptism.”

As an apprentice, Piazzolla learned yeites from musicians such as Troilo, pianist Orlando Goñi (1914-1945), and bassist Enrique “Kicho” Díaz (1918-1992).

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102 Gorin, Piazzolla, 61.
Inspired by a concert of Arthur Rubinstein, Piazzolla also became interested in classical music.\textsuperscript{103} While working for Troilo’s orchestra, he began formal composition studies in 1941 with the celebrated Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera (1916-1983) and remained under his tutelage for six years.\textsuperscript{104} Piazzolla attributes much of his formal musical training to Ginastera. He states in an interview: “Thanks to this musical instruction [with Ginastera], I began to do new arrangements. I got to know the orchestra and I started to compose string quartets for tango orchestras.”\textsuperscript{105} Thus, Ginastera’s instruction inspired Piazzolla to begin transforming the tango to include classical compositional techniques.

In 1944, Piazzolla left Troilo’s orchestra in order to have more artistic freedom. Piazzolla’s resignation at the age of twenty-three shocked the tango world. The public considered it almost an act of betrayal. The young Argentine bandoneonista described his rationale for leaving in his memoirs: “In truth, I wanted to play my music. I was fed up with his crossing out my arrangements and with the cabaret life.”\textsuperscript{106} However, Piazzolla continued to arrange for Troilo’s orchestra as well as for the orchestras of Calo and Francini-Pontier.\textsuperscript{107} During this period, he composed the pieces “Prepárense” (Prepare yourself), “Triunfal” (Triumphant), “Contratiempo” (Offbeat), and “Contrabajeando” (Doublebassing). Pablo Aslan

\textsuperscript{103}José Montes-Baquer, Astor Piazzolla in Conversation and Concert: The Next Tango, directed by José Montes-Baquer, produced by Harald Gericke, 88 min., Deutsche Grammophon, 2007, DVD.

\textsuperscript{104}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{105}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{106}Gorin, Piazzolla, 67.

notes in his master’s thesis that the pieces of this period are a continuation of the stylistic traits of the tangueros of the previous generation. Specifically, the pieces have a rhythmic A section that contrasts with a more melodic and slower B section. One can also identify this stylistic trait in the music of Ginastera, for example, in his Obertura para el “Fausto” criollo op. 9, which contrasts fast, rhythmical sections with slow, melodic sections.

Piazzolla also composed classical music during the early 1950s. With his Sinfonía Buenos Aires he won the Fabián Sevitzky Prize in 1953 to study music in Paris for one year. Thus, he traveled to Paris in 1954 and began composition lessons with the renowned composition teacher, Nadia Boulanger. Piazzolla’s story with Boulanger is similar to that of other young composers who worked with her: she helped him find his voice. After looking at numerous scores, Boulanger asked Piazzolla to play the music of his country. He then played “Triunfal” for her and she replied: “Astor, this is beautiful. I like it a lot. Here is the true Piazzolla—do not ever leave him.” Piazzolla then returned to Buenos Aires and embarked on his transformative journey with the tango.

**Birth of the nuevo tango (1955)**

Piazzolla formed his Octeto Buenos Aires in 1955, which marked a turning point in his musical development. With this octet, he created the musical genre known as nuevo tango, which synthesized his influences and education during his developmental years. The ensemble consisted of two bandoneones, two violins,

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108 Ibid.

109 Gorin, Piazzolla, 71.
cello, bass, piano, and electric guitar. This instrumentation, which in the liner notes is attributed to hearing Gerry Mulligan’s Octet, resembles that of the *sexteto típico* of the *guardia nueva*, but includes the addition of the cello and the electric guitar, a completely new instrument to the genre.\textsuperscript{110}

Piazzolla described his musical intentions for the octet in the liner notes. He wrote: “The sole purpose of the *Octeto Buenos Aires* is to renovate popular tango, to maintain its essence, to introduce new rhythms, new harmonies, new melodies, new tone colors, and forms.”\textsuperscript{111} In essence, he incorporated classical composition techniques along with jazz harmonies and improvisational practices with traditional tango. For example, he used polytonal chords (a la Stravinsky) at the end of “Anone” by combining D Major and A\textsubscript{b} Major. In the liner notes, he attributed the style of the waltz at the end of “Haydee” to Ravel. Both “Marrón y azul” (Brown and Blue) and “Tangology” (The Study of Tango) contained long passages of improvisation, specifically in the electric guitar. He also incorporated string techniques from the *escuela decareana* such as *lija* and *tambor*. Notably, all of the pieces on this recording are tangos, but the album features the works of the early *tangueros* such as “Los mareados” by Juan Carlos Cobián and those by contemporary musicians such as “A fuego lento” by Horacio Salgán and “Marron y azul” by Piazzolla.

Piazzolla’s innovative interpretations of the tango created much controversy in Argentina. The tango world divided into “piazzollistas” and “anti-piazzollistas.”\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{110} Astor Piazzolla, *Astor Piazzolla-Octeto Buenos Aires*, Disc Jockey DIS 15001, 1957, LP.

\textsuperscript{111} “El único propósito del *Octeto Buenos Aires* es renovar el tango popular, mantener su esencia, introducir nuevos ritmos, nuevas armonías, melodías, timbres y formas.” Ibid.

\textsuperscript{112} Azzi, *Le Grand Tango*, 79.
Azzi and Collier remark in their biography: “A particular bone of contention was the octet’s blasphemous inclusion of the electric guitar.”\(^{113}\) Azzi even mentions that Horacio Malvicino (the electric guitarist) received death threats. Piazzolla equated the public’s reception to changing religions: “In Argentina, you could change anything, except the tango. It was like converting to another religion. As if, from being a Christian, I’d become a Buddhist or Muslim.”\(^ {114}\) With this controversy, the octet did not achieve great financial success and Piazzolla quickly disbanded it; however, this ensemble established \textit{nuevo tango} as a genre.

\textbf{The Development of \textit{nuevo tango} (1958-1970)}

Like his father, Piazzolla hoped to achieve greater success in New York, and, in 1958, he relocated with his family (including his wife, Dedé, and his two children, Diana and Daniel) to New York. During this short-lived migration, Piazzolla’s father died and in his honor he composed one of his trademark pieces, “Adiós Nonino.” This piece remained in Piazzolla’s performing repertoire throughout his life and was performed by almost all of Piazzolla’s subsequent ensembles. There are over thirty recordings of it. During this New York period, he also formed a jazz-tango quintet, which unsuccessfully merged versions of “Triunfal” and “April in Paris.”\(^{115}\)

In 1960, Piazzolla and his family returned to Buenos Aires and he formed his second major ensemble the \textit{Quinteto Nuevo Tango}. This ensemble consisted of bandoneón, violin, piano, electric guitar and bass, an instrumentation that Piazzolla

\(^{113}\) Ibid., 60.

\(^{114}\) Montes-Baquer, \textit{The Next Tango}, DVD.

\(^{115}\) Gorin, \textit{Piazzolla}, 133.
re-established during the late 1970s. The recordings of the first Quinteto feature classic tangos by musicians of the guardia nueva as well as the 1961 album, Piazzolla interpreta a Piazzolla, featuring only Piazzolla’s compositions. The latter included the first recording of “Adiós Nonino” as well as “Decarisimo,” a tribute to Julio De Caro.

While the instrumentation of the first Quinteto remained the same, the members of the ensemble changed throughout the 1960s. In its initial form, the group included idolized figures from Piazzolla’s past such as Elvino Vardaro, the violinist to whom he wrote the fan letter at the age of seventeen, and bassist “Kicho” Díaz of Troilo’s orchestra. Other notable members included Horacio Malvicino (electric guitar) of the Octeto Buenos Aires, Oscar López Ruiz (electric guitar), Jaime Gosis (piano), and Antoino Agri (violin). Each musician brought his own distinct style to the first Quinteto. Aslan, in his thesis, described Vardaro’s playing as a derivation of De Caro’s, specifically with the use of portamento and a delayed, but fast vibrato. Díaz also played in the style of the escuela decareana, which, by the 1960s, incorporated Pugliese’s emphatic arrastre known as “yumba.” Furthermore, Piazzolla, in his memoirs, recalled that he composed and arranged specifically for the musicians in his group. When discussing Gosis’s role within the in ensemble, he recalled:

Gosis’s history with me has a secret. He had played with Pedro Maffia, and I knew what music he liked. So I started writing things for piano as if it were a bandoneón. Gosis caught on quickly. He played the piano with a sound I really never heard anyone else get.  

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117 Gorin, Piazzolla, 80.
In this quotation, Piazzolla was referring to the deep and rich tone color of Gosis, which is in contrast to the more percussive style of Pablo Ziegler of the later quintet.

In 1965, the first Quinteto traveled to the United States and Brazil as a part of an Argentine cultural tour promoted by the government. While touring, the ensemble gave memorable performances at Philharmonic Hall in New York. Robert Shelton, a New York Times critic, emphasized the hybridity of the ensemble’s style by describing the quintet as a cross between a 1920s ballroom dance band, a Chico Hamilton-Fred Katz modern jazz combo, and a classical quintet that plays chamber music and bossa nova.118

In contrast to the Octeto Buenos Aires, Piazzolla employed poets and singers to work with the first Quinteto. In 1965, Piazzolla collaborated with the celebrated Argentine writer and poet Jorge Luis Borges to make the record El tango: Jorge Luis Borges—Astor Piazzolla.119 Despite their frequent differences in opinion, Piazzolla had much admiration for Borges and respected his literary talents.120 The composer, however, had a more fruitful artistic partnership with his lifelong friend Horacio Ferrer. Their collaboration, also featuring singer Roberto Goyeneche, produced a famous recording of “Balada para un loco” and “Chiquilín de Bachín” in 1969. Notably, the works of Borges and Ferrer are a contrast to the works of Discépolo

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119 Borges unfortunately did not appreciate the nuevo tango of Piazzolla and preferred the milongas of the guardia vieja. Azzi, Le Grand Tango, 91.

120 Gorin, Piazzolla, 103-105.
from the previous generation. Both wrote in a modernist literary style, and specifically Ferrer’s works identify with surrealism.

During the 1960s, Piazzolla and Ferrer also undertook the major project of creating a tango operita. This large-scale work, titled *María de Buenos Aires*, features the protagonist María personifying the life of the tango and more broadly the history of Buenos Aires. This work starred Piazzolla’s girlfriend at the time, Amelita Baltar, in the title role. As with the *Octeto Buenos Aires*, Piazzolla assumed tremendous economic distress in order to produce this work. He stated: “I sold an apartment and a car to put it [*María de Buenos Aires*] on stage and was left with nothing. It was a total loss. But I enjoyed myself, and that operita I wrote with Horacio Ferrer was among the most important pieces I’ve ever composed. It was colossal for its time.”121 From a compositional perspective, the work does not have a dramatic story line, but is rather a compilation of dance forms including waltzes, tangos, and *milongas* as well as a large fugue in Act I, “Fuga y misterio.”

**The Experimental Phase (1971-1978)**

After returning from an extended vacation in Europe in 1971, Piazzolla formed his new ensemble, a nonet, which he called *Conjunto 9* (Ensemble 9). This group, financially supported by the City of Buenos Aires, consisted of bandoneón, piano, electric guitar, percussion, two violins, viola, cello, and bass. The nonet uniquely included percussion, which was very uncommon in tango orchestras. With this addition, Piazzolla experimented with a style that resembled jazz or rock more than it did tango. In the new style, the percussionist divided the beat in such a way

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121 Gorin, *Piazzolla*, 137.
that the tango swing and strong *arrastres*, which were prevalent in the tangos at the end of the *guardia nueva*, were lost. The overall sound of the nonet was very lively, as demonstrated in the piece “3x4.” Piazzolla, however, was very fond of this ensemble; he referred to it as a “big dream.” He recorded a two-album record set with this group, titled, *Música popular contemporánea de la ciudad de Buenos Aires*, Vols. 1 and 2. Despite Piazzolla’s affection for the ensemble, the group disbanded after two years due to the withdrawal of government funding.

Following his heart attack of 1973, Piazzolla began a new series of artistic endeavors including working with Gerry Mulligan and forming an electronic octet. Like Vardaro, Mulligan was an icon of Piazzolla’s past; specifically, he had been an inspiration in forming the *Octeto Buenos Aires*. In 1974, Piazzolla began filling his artistic vision by recording *Summit* with the cool-jazz legend. This album features new compositions including “Twenty Years Ago” and “Twenty Years After” in honor of Piazzolla’s first and second experience with Mulligan. The style of this album is truly a fusion of both Mulligan’s and Piazzolla’s style (specifically, Piazzolla’s style of *Conjunto 9*) but it does not feature improvisation to the same extent as in Mulligan’s non-tango previous works.123

In 1975, Piazzolla entered into an electronic phase and formed a new octet. This ensemble consisted of bandoneón, piano, bass, electric guitar, percussion, organ, synthesizer, and flute/saxophone. Notably, Piazzolla’s son Daniel played synthesizer in this ensemble. In contrast to the other groups, this octet’s repertoire featured a

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122 Ibid., 50.

123 Piazzolla states in his memoirs: “He [Mulligan] had some trouble following the scores. He hadn’t been reading a lot of music recently, and my rhythmic accents are not easy to play on the sax.” Ibid., 110.
tremendous amount of improvisation. The sound of this ensemble resembled popular rock of the period more than tango.\textsuperscript{124} During a sold-out concert at the Teatro Gran Rex in Buenos Aires, Piazzolla had an epiphany to return to the tango of his first Quinteto. Gorin writes in the postscript of Piazzolla’s memoirs: “For that concert he wrote “500 motivaciones,” a tune he played that night for the first and only time, a piece in which not even the bandoneón, also for the first time in his life, could connect him with the tango feel.”\textsuperscript{125} After that concert, Piazzolla returned to the quintet instrumentation and began rearranging his previous works.

**Artistic Pinnacle (1978-1990)**

In 1978, Piazzolla formed the second Quinteto, through which he achieved his greatest international success. Consisting of the same instrumentation as the previous ensemble, this group toured the world for eleven years and created two notable albums, *Tango: Zero Hour* (1986) and *La camorra* (1989), as well as numerous recordings of live performances such as those in Central Park and at the Montreal Jazz Festival. Piazzolla aficionados and the bandoneonista himself often cite *Tango: Zero Hour* and *La camorra* as the pinnacle of his career.\textsuperscript{126}

Stylistically, Piazzolla returned to his tango roots and his earlier conception of nuevo tango. Whereas, with previous ensembles of the 1970s, he was exploring the use of percussion as well as the styles of rock and jazz, Piazzolla fundamentally derived the musical characteristics of the second Quinteto from the tango genre. He

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 164.

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
incorporated the style, sound, rubato, and yeites of Gardel, De Caro, Troilo, and Pugliese. However, he did not ignore his previous classical or jazz experiences. He included counterpoint, for example, in the “Fugata” from La camorra, as well as embellishments in a Baroque style such as turns and mordents. He incorporated small sections for improvisation and chords reflecting jazz harmonies such as the opening ninth chord in “La camorra I.” In addition, the quintet had a notable performance and recording session with jazz vibraphonist Gary Burton at the 1986 Montreux Jazz Festival.

As with the first Quinteto, the personnel of the second Quinteto contributed to the overall style of the ensemble. It featured Piazzolla (bandoneón), Fernando Suárez Paz (violin), Pablo Ziegler (piano), Horacio Malvicino (electric guitar), and Héctor Console (bass). Almost all of these musicians had their foundations in tango with the exception of Ziegler, who had studied both classical and jazz piano, but played in a jazz idiom. As evidenced by the Octeto Buenos Aires, Malvicino also had strong jazz influences. Furthermore, many of the musicians, namely Piazzolla, Suárez Paz, Ziegler and Console, additionally had training as classical musicians. Thus as an ensemble, the musicians were able to interweave elements of tango, classical, and jazz to negotiate an overall style that defined nuevo tango.

In the midst of touring the world with the second Quinteto, Piazzolla also completed four other major projects. His first was the writing of the film score to El exilio de Gardel, for which he won the César Award for Best Film Music in 1986. He recorded his Concerto for bandoneón and orchestra in 1987. Also in that year, he and Ferrer revived an unsuccessful French version of Maria de Buenos Aires. Due to
the revised production of the *operita*, which resembled French Grand Opera more
than the original conception, Piazzolla deemed the revival a disaster. Furthermore,
in 1988, Piazzolla recorded the score to the Broadway show *Tango apasionado* with
the album, *The Rough Dancer and the Cyclical Night*.

Unfortunately, the momentum of the second *Quinteto* ended in 1988 when
Piazzolla had quadruple bypass surgery. Following the surgery, he undertook two
smaller projects: the *Sexteto* and a collaboration with the Kronos Quartet. Piazzolla
created a deeper sonority with the *Sexteto* by replacing the violin with the cello. He
also added a second bandoneón, which had not occurred since the *Octeto Buenos Aires*. Azzi and Collier assert that Piazzolla introduced the second bandoneón to
reduce his strain and fatigue after the surgery; however, it should be noted that
Piazzolla performed with the same vigor and was never pleased with the addition.

The other major transformation between the second *Quinteto* and the *Sexteto* was the
role of the piano. Piazzolla hired Gerardo Gandini, an Argentine composer who also
had studied with Ginastera, to play piano with the ensemble. Piazzolla gave Gandini
great artistic freedom, which is evidenced by the use of tone clusters in “Tanguedia
III.” The *Sexteto* never recorded an album; however, one may listen to live
performances of the ensemble on posthumously released CDs such as *The Lausanne
Concert* (recorded in 1989 and released in 1993).

Piazzolla’s final artistic endeavor was the album, *Five Tango Sensations*
performed and recorded with the Kronos Quartet. This work resembled *Sette*

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128 Ibid., 264.
Sequenze, which was written for a German string ensemble in 1983.\textsuperscript{129} Notably, this is the second piece that Piazzolla composed for the quartet. Previously, the ensemble had recorded “Four, For Tango,” on the CD entitled Winter Was Hard. Stylistically, Five Tango Sensations is a study in Piazzolla’s extended string techniques with the incorporation of gestures such as lija and tambor.

\textbf{Postscript}

Piazzolla suffered a cerebral hemorrhage in 1990 and passed away on July 4, 1992; however, his legacy has endured to the present day. Musicians of his second Quinteto, such as Suárez Paz and Ziegler, have recorded his pieces with new ensembles, in addition to composing their own works in the nuevo tango tradition. In Buenos Aires, almost all tango concerts feature at least one work of Piazzolla. In the United States, his music has been an inspiration to classical and jazz musicians alike. Thus, the remainder of this thesis is a discussion of how to approach a performance of Piazzolla’s music in the present.

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 271.
On September 6, 1987, Piazzolla and the second Quinteto performed live for a sold-out audience of four thousand people at New York’s Central Park Bandshell. Reporter Heidi Waleson describes the New York fans, despite the rain, as going “decidedly wild” for the nuevo tango, and she also states that there was “something mesmerizing about these five men in somber black trousers and shirts.” Scholar David Cannata notes that this concert was the “New York cachet for which he [Piazzolla] had so ardently yearned.” This chapter seeks to identify the performance practices of this successful quintet that the crowds and critics praised.

In this discussion, I reconstruct performance practices of Piazzolla’s second Quinteto through a gestural analysis. Here, I define a gesture based on Robert Hatten’s concept of an “expressively significant, energetic, temporal shaping across all human modalities of perceptions, action, and cognition.” Therefore, a gesture is a multi-dimensional, communicative phenomenon that takes place within a timeframe. Furthermore, a gesture, as established by Steven Feld, assumes meaning

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in relation to the social structure within which it is embedded.\textsuperscript{133} In order to decode the significance of the gestures pertaining to Piazzolla’s performance practices, one must therefore engage with these contextual dimensions.

To study the gestures of Piazzolla’s \textit{nuevo tango}, I have analyzed live video recordings and applied participant-observation techniques in the cultural context of the ensemble, specifically through my experience working with \textit{tangueros} during fieldwork in New York and Buenos Aires. I seek to document the meaning of these gestures particularly for those in the United States who are unaware of the Argentine cultural background that underlies these works. My discussion here centers on three notable audio recordings, \textit{Tango: Zero Hour}, \textit{La camorra}, and \textit{The Central Park Concert}, as well as on the live video recording from the Montreal Jazz Festival. These recordings are the most famous examples of the ensemble and exhibit the mature style of Piazzolla’s performance practices that mark the culmination of his career.

I introduce this chapter by examining the cues to performance gestures that the CD liner notes and titles of \textit{Tango: Zero Hour} and \textit{La camorra} suggest. In this case, I extend Hatten’s theory of the musical score as a script for interpreting gestures to encompass the tangible object of the CD.\textsuperscript{134} I then follow the analysis of these features with a treatment of the performance practices of the second \textit{Quinteto} and the way that the group’s gestures stem from, and relate to, the position of the performers on stage. I also discuss instrumental roles within the quintet, specifically describing


\textsuperscript{134} Hatten, \textit{Interpreting Musical Gestures}, 131.
the gestures that are intrinsic to these functions and their relationship to performance practices. Finally, I describe each individual musician’s contribution to the ensemble and his role in shaping the group’s performance practices. The ultimate goal of this analysis is to provide musicians and scholars with the necessary tools to recover and recreate the performance practices of Piazzolla’s second Quinteto, in order to perform his music within a culturally meaningful setting.

**Examination of CD Liner Notes**

In 1986, Piazzolla recorded the album *Tango: Zero Hour* (or, in Spanish, *Tango: la hora cero*) with the New York jazz/avant-garde producer Kip Hanrahan.\(^{135}\) Literally, “zero hour” is the time after midnight; it is “an hour of absolute ending and absolute beginning.”\(^{136}\) As a title in Spanish, “la hora cero” is reminiscent of the composer’s earlier work “Buenos Aires Hora Cero,” which was one of Piazzolla’s first compositions in the nuevo tango style. Thus, *Tango: Zero Hour* reincarnates the new tango theme that initiated Piazzolla’s first experience in the genre. This CD marks the end of Piazzolla’s decade of compositional experimentation (as in the electronic octet) and signals the beginning of the composer’s mature sound.

*Tango: Zero Hour* also highlights what Piazzolla whimsically proposed as the formula for nuevo tango: “Tango + Tragedy + Comedy + Kilombo (Whorehouse) = New Tango.” This equation is listed on the back of the CD liner notes; in addition, the group chants this slogan as if it were inside a brothel during the opening of “Tanguedia III.” With this mantra, Piazzolla immediately evokes the imagery of the

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\(^{136}\) Ibid.
early bordello, with its virile gestures characterized by assertiveness, toughness, and courageousness.

La camorra (1989), the second major album by this ensemble (also produced by Hanrahan), portrays similar images.\(^{137}\) The title itself has multiple meanings associated with the underworld. Fernando González, in the liner notes, loosely defines a “camorra” as a “quarrel.”\(^{138}\) Omar García Brunelli writes that one can also derive the word from the lunfardo term “camorrear,” translated as “to have an armed fight.”\(^{139}\) In tango terminology, scholars often refer to this “armed fight” as a *duelo criollo*. The term camorra can also be traced to a branch of the Neapolitan Mafia organization that had connections in New York around the turn of the twentieth century.\(^{140}\) Due to Piazzolla’s intercultural heritage, one may assume that he was aware of the polysemous significance of the word.

In contrast to the guardia vieja characteristics evoked in the CD title, the album subtitle, *La soledad de la provocación apasionada* (The Solitude of Passionate Provocation), yields the concepts of introspection and individuality, recalling the guardia nueva themes of *tristeza*, *mufarse* and *nostalgia*. Thus, together the verbal cues provided on this CD synthesize key elements of the guardia vieja and nueva traditions.

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\(^{137}\) Astor Piazzolla, *La camorra*, American Clave, AMCL 1021, 1989, CD.

\(^{138}\) Ibid.


\(^{140}\) Arthur Cheney Train, *Courts, Criminals, and the Camorra* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1912), 143-248.
Rather than relying on typical liner notes to describe the CD production and compositional processes, Piazzolla chose to insert poetic prose by Fernando González, who at the time was a columnist for *The Miami Herald*. González narrates:

*Guapos* are heroes or hoodlums.
Others dream of courage. A *guapo* doesn’t look for a fight or a dangerous passion—but never backs down from one either. He’s an anachronism. Buenos Aires has changed around him. And these are not heroic times. Not even thieves speak about honor.
The stages where he once played out his life—*los comités*, the storefronts from where the local party bosses laid down the law; *los boliches*, where one could always find a cheap *caña* and a good card game; the red-and-gold whorehouses— are gone or disappearing.
But in his world, *una camorra*, a quarrel, may still start with a couple of words or a brush of shoulders. And he knows the rituals well, the whispers, the choreography of steps and knives, the flashes of red and black, the screams, the silence.
It doesn’t matter that he is getting old now. The young guys still come to test him. And there is no choice. There never is. He fights.

With this prose, González conjures up rough images of the *arrabales* in Buenos Aires. He replaces the *compadrito*, a figure associated with early tango, with the *guapo*, a more contemporary tango figure portraying masculine bravery. The *guapo* also evokes a common tango theme of *nostalgia* for a life that once was, and a life that now barely exists.

Through examining the CD cover and liner notes of *Tango: Zero Hour* and *La camorra*, one immediately receives information that relates to Piazzolla’s conception. One recurring image of these CDs is the *bordello*. Piazzolla musically establishes the

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141 González is an Argentine writer living in the United States, who has contributed to the arts and culture as well as the popular music columns in the *Washington Post*, *Downbeat* magazine, and *The Miami Herald*. He collaborated with Piazzolla on the liner notes of *La camorra* as well as translated Gorin’s biography/memoir of Piazzolla.

142 Astor Piazzolla, *La camorra*, liner notes and trans. by Fernando González, American Clave AMCL 1021, 1989, CD.
representation of a whorehouse with the group’s chanting at the beginning of
“Tanguedia III” (Tango: Zero Hour). He also explicitly depicts a sexual act with a
male grunt in “La camorra I.” Therefore, in a concert performance, it would be
appropriate to include aural characteristics associated with bordellos, such as loud
shouting or whistling during a piece.

Given this background, one could infer that many of the pieces from these
CDs are reenactments of the duelo criollo. For example, the description on the album
cover suggests the imagery of a knife fight at the beginning of “La camorra I.” The
piece begins andante or moderato (quarter note ≈ 108), which could be described as a
walking speed. Gradually the tempo increases, which occurs simultaneously with an
increase in volume and textural density, suggesting the progressive entanglement of
the fighters, along with the growing complexity of the piece. “Tanguedia III” uses
similar imagery and ends with a shrill, descending glissando in the double stops of the
violin, which, to this writer, portrays a scream. Thus, it is imperative that
contemporary performers of nuevo tango understand the historical significance of the
guardia vieja within Piazzolla’s compositions, because the bordello and duelo criollo
have cultural connotations that extend to include interpretative implications.

The themes of tristeza, nostalgia, and mufarse are also apparent in the pieces
from both CDs. For instance, the middle section of “La camorra I” has a slower,
more lyrical character that simulates nostalgia. Another example is “Milonga del
ángel” from Tango: Zero Hour. In this case, Piazzolla draws his inspiration from the
milonga canción. In addition to the milonga rhythmic pattern, the piece opens in a
minor key and uses a slow descending melodic line, characteristics that typify an older sung tradition (see Musical Example 4.1).

Musical Example 4.1. Theme from “Milonga del ángel.”

Notably on the CD Tango: Zero Hour, the musicians played more softly as well as incorporated rubato and ornamentation in these melodic passages. Accordingly, today’s performers should be aware of the stylistic implications of the milonga canción tradition and the consequent utilization of associated musical features.

In sum, the visual elements of these albums correlate with the gestural imagery of Piazzolla and his second Quinteto. The music of the CDs in turn evokes images of porteños talking, walking, fighting, and reminiscing in the Argentine capital city. By determining which gestures are involved, contemporary musicians can ascertain appropriate tempos and characters within a piece. For example, the gestural image of walking and a knife fight suggest the use of an andante tempo and accelerando in “Tanguedia III.” It is therefore essential that future performing musicians be aware of these semiotic associations and their inherent relationship with the tango culture of Buenos Aires.

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Quinteto Ensemble

Piazzolla’s most successful ensemble, the second Quinteto, performed in the most internationally prestigious venues for tango, jazz, and classical music. Interestingly, when one listens to the various live recordings from the Montreal Jazz Festival, the Central Park Concert, and the Teatro Colón, one can generalize that this ensemble employed the same performance practices in Argentine and international locations as well as in classical and jazz venues. Therefore, while I treat each performance and CD as a separate event, it is possible to formulate a model for Piazzolla’s performance practices. The only exception to this generalization of performance practices relates to the alteration or addition of personnel. For example, when jazz vibraphonist Gary Burton joined the ensemble at the Montreux Jazz Festival, the group incorporated more improvisation.

Based on live footage and concert reviews, one can infer that the musicians were typically positioned in the same formation on stage. As the leader of the ensemble, Piazzolla stood in the center. Fernando Suárez Paz usually played on stage left. Horacio Malvicino was on stage right, opposite Suárez Paz. Pablo Ziegler, who played the piano, sat behind Piazzolla and slightly to stage right. The piano was positioned parallel to the edge of the stage and the upper register was downstage, which thus allowed for the sound from the open piano lid to project outward. Héctor Console, the bassist, stood at stage left, next to Ziegler.

Each performer’s placement related to his musical function within the ensemble. The instruments that supplied the melody were downstage, such as the bandoneón and violin. The piano, electric guitar, and occasionally the bandoneón
provided harmonic support, which created a triangle on stage right. The bass and the piano sustained the underlying rhythmic foundation and were located next to each other upstage.

Furthermore, the function of each instrument had a direct relationship to the player’s use of rhythm, rubato, melodic embellishment, improvisation, and extended techniques. For example, Ziegler (the pianist) provided the rhythmic and harmonic support for the ensemble and therefore did not employ rubato or melodic embellishment. In addition, the musical functions of the various instruments established the overall balance between them. The bandoneón and violin were generally louder due to their dominant melodic role, whereas the piano, guitar, and bass were generally softer due to their supportive harmonic function. The modern performer should therefore be cognizant of his or her instrumental position within the ensemble and strive to emulate this balance of sonority.

**Individual Contributions**

**Piazzolla, Bandoneón**

Just as Carlos Gardel’s smile formed a critical part of his visual appearance and representation, Piazzolla’s physical stance emerged as a distinctive feature in many of his images. Photographers and other artists often show him towering over his elongated bandoneón. Such a portrayal is in part due to Piazzolla’s reputation for standing during performances, which is contrary to the practice of most *bandoneonistas*. Maintaining an upright posture for a *bandoneonista* is physically exhausting, due to the weight of the instrument (approximately twenty pounds). Musicians therefore usually rest the instrument on their laps while performing.
Piazzolla, however, chose to stand, and occasionally relieved the pressure by placing the instrument on his propped knee. One possible reason for his upright physical stance stems from the additional physical strength that one gains in one’s upper body while standing. However, a more plausible reason, to which Gorin alludes in the composer’s memoirs, is that Piazzolla wanted to be different and sought to impose his music on those around him.144

Another physical trait of Piazzolla’s performance practices results from his ability to play the bandoneón in both the open and closed positions. Because the notes of the instrument can generally be accessed both ways, many bandoneonistas play primarily in the open position and close the bellows between each phrase. Thus, Piazzolla displayed his virtuosic command of the instrument by interchanging freely between the two positions. In this writer’s opinion, performers should attempt to emulate this style of playing, because it augments one’s artistic palette, specifically relating to virtuosity and expression.

One may also observe that Piazzolla often played in an extended open position, especially when the bandoneón had a melodic role. This style of playing required substantial control of the airflow through the bellows. It is similar to a singer sustaining a melodic phrase over one breath or a violinist playing with one bow. Furthermore, Piazzolla used the extended position to correspond compositionally to the melodic employment of long note values. For example, “Adiós Nonino” consists of a series of half notes and dotted half notes (see Musical Example 4.2). Thus, Piazzolla mimicked the aural sustained note values with the

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physically slow, measured extension of the bandoneón. This performance practice is ideal for contemporary performers, who can benefit from using a physical gesture to represent the shape of the musical phrase.

Musical Example 4.2. Theme from “Adiós Nonino” (bandoneón).

Within his melodic lines, Piazzolla often utilized ornamentation to increase the intensity of the music. This embellishment always highlighted the overall melodic effect, which was fundamentally derived from the tango tradition. In case of “Adiós Nonino,” the ornamentation augmented the emotions of yearning for a lost love or nostalgia. As such, these added pitches should be played deliberately, rather than as extraneous additions. Moreover, Piazzolla did not notate the embellishments in the bandoneón part, but improvised them. He employed an individual style of ornamentation, which usually consisted of mordents, turns, or scalar figures (see Musical Example 4.3).

Musical Example 4.3. Piazzolla’s Ornamented Melodic Line of “Adiós Nonino.”

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146 Astor Piazzolla, The Central Park Concert, Chesky Records JD 107, 1994, CD.
To further increase the intensity of the music, Piazzolla often incorporated a style of rubato that is derived from the *tango canción*. When examining the rubato of this tradition, Martín Kutnowski writes:

> All good singers introduced some kind of rhythmic, melodic, or dynamic distortion … Such rhythmic transformation very often consisted in arriving at the end of a phrase somehow faster than required, thus giving an impression of anxiety, as if the person were losing control over his or her own emotions.\(^{147}\)

Thus, many tango singers often arrived at the end of the phrase early, especially if the natural speech pattern of the words and the meaning of the text dictated such rubato.

In terms of instrumental rubato, Piazzolla often imitated the *tango canción* tradition. For example in “Milonga del ángel” of *Tango: Zero Hour*, Piazzolla distorted the rhythm and arrived at the end of the phrase early. In addition, he accelerated to the climax of the phrase in order to sustain the peak note longer. Horacio Salgán, a contemporary *tanguero* of Piazzolla, terms the latter type of instrumental rubato as “fraseo” or “fraseado.”\(^{148}\)

Interestingly, one can link this type of rubato to the physical act of playing the bandoneón. Similarly to the voice, the sound production on the bandoneón corresponds to the airflow through the instrument. Thus, a sustained sound can only last a limited length of time. If Piazzolla wanted to highlight a note by sustaining it, then he had to arrive at that note early due to the limited amount of airflow. He often had the bandoneón fully extended upon approaching the ends of phrases and thus had depleted the air supply. Therefore, he had to arrive at the end of the phrase early in


\(^{148}\) This information was obtained by the author’s fieldwork in Argentina.
order to maintain the sound. Often this extension is accentuated on the left side of the instrument because the right hand had to remain upright to play the melody with mobility. This gesture seemingly relates to the *tango canción* tradition and creates the impression that Piazzolla was losing control over the instrument, just as the singer of the *tango canción* was losing control over his or her emotions. Piazzolla’s style of rubato, derived from the *tango canción*, is therefore a fundamental performance practice that must be incorporated in rendering slower, more lyrical pieces and passages.

The last melodic gesture relates to the execution of vibrato. The *bandoneonista* produces this technique by shaking the bellows of the instrument. The speed at which this shaking occurs, in addition to the amplitude, determines the quality of the vibrato. Furthermore, the vibrato can only be produced in an open position because one cannot effectively shake the bellows in a closed position. In addition, vibrato on the bandoneón occurs after the pitch has sounded because one must first pull the bellows open. It would thus be appropriate, in terms of the modern performer, to emulate this style of vibrato on the bandoneón or to mimic it on other instruments.

Whenever the bandoneón functions as a harmonic and rhythmic instrument, Piazzolla employs a different set of gestures, which correspond to the *yeites* of tango. The most important *yeite* that Piazzolla utilized was *arrastre*, which on the bandoneón, called for opening the instrument forcefully from a closed position. One may also describe it as a pulling apart of the bandoneón. In the style of Pugliese, Piazzolla accentuated his *arrastres*, as exemplified in the opening of “La camorra I.”
In this case, the *arrastre* began an eighth note prior to the downbeat. In addition, Piazzolla’s *arrastres* were forte, and accented, as well as forceful and pesante. Notably, the other musicians of the ensemble imitated Piazzolla’s interpretation of *arrastre* on their instruments. Due to *arrastre* being a fundamental component of the tango, it is imperative that contemporary musicians incorporate this *yeite* into their performance practices.

**Fernando Suárez Paz, Violin**

At the time of joining Piazzolla’s quintet, Fernando Suárez Paz was thirty-five years old and had experience as a violinist in both the Orquesta Filarmónica de Buenos Aires as well as the tango orchestras of Aníbal Troilo, Horacio Salgán, Nestor Marconi, and Raúl Garello. He possessed classical technique with respect to bowing and ornamentation as well as a style of playing derived from the *escuela decareana*. In his memoirs, Piazzolla described Suárez Paz as the best violinist with whom he played, and stated: “[He] not only plays well; he is very expressive. He is intuitive about adding things; his phrasing enhanced my music.”

One can divide the gestures and performance practices of Suárez Paz into three categories: those relating to the bow (right hand), those relating to the pitch (left hand), and those that incorporate both hands. With regard to the first category, Suárez Paz assimilated many gestures or techniques from the classical tradition into his style of playing. When he performed lyrical, melodic lines, he employed long, well-executed *detaché* strokes resembling Piazzolla’s elongated sound and gestures.

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Furthermore, he often utilized a *lourê* (or a *portato*) stroke when playing an ascending scale to introduce a melody, again in a manner similar to the bandoneón.

Suárez Paz’s left-hand gestures ran contrary to most classical violin methods. He often played with very flat fingers, which is more characteristic of viola or cello playing. On the violin, the use of flat fingers in the left hand creates a muffled sound that lacks clarity as well as hindering dexterity. However, this sound is desirable in tango, and the violinist does not need to play with the same velocity as a typical classical player. Secondly, Suárez Paz employed numerous *portamenti* from the *escuela decareana*. He accentuated the slides between notes with the use of flat fingers and shifting with the wrist. Finally, he employed a fast and wide vibrato, which he used for expressive purposes. Often, he shifted with a slide and then included vibrato. In “La camorra III,” Piazzolla notates “a lo Vardaro” in the score, which is an indication of the aforementioned style of playing. While today’s classical players do not need to change their techniques to play Piazzolla’s music, it is appropriate to include *portamenti* as well as the related gestures in passages that imply this style of playing.

In a direct lineage from the *escuela decareana*, Suárez Paz also utilized numerous extended string techniques, which can be described as gestures. These include *lija, tambor*, and *golpe*, all of which were discussed in Chapter 2. (See Table 4.1 for a complete list of gestures that are executed.) Suárez Paz also incorporated *escobe*, which means “sweeping with a broom.” In this technique, the violinist brushes the hairs of the bow across the D string by the frog. This motion differs from
the way that violinist normally uses the bow, it is as if the performer is sweeping rosin onto the bridge.

Two other gestures that Suárez Paz uses are variations of glissandos. The first is *látigo*, which, as the name suggests, emulates a whip. The violinist begins in first position on the E string at the tip of the bow. Then the violinist plays a fast, upbow glissando to an indeterminable pitch in approximately seventh position on the E string. In addition, the violinist makes a crescendo through the *látigo* and ends the gesture with an accent. The other version of the glissando, the *perro* (dog), does not evoke such a clear sound image, but consists of a descending glissando on the A string with a short, fast downbow.

Table 4.1. Gestures Translating into Extended Violin Techniques.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Gesture</th>
<th>Technique</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>lija</em> (sandpaper) or <em>chicharra</em></td>
<td>playing with the bow on the D string behind the bridge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>golpe</em> (knock)</td>
<td>tapping the violin with the left hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>látigo</em> (whip)</td>
<td>playing a fast ascending glissando on the E string with an upbow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>perro</em> (dog)</td>
<td>playing a fast descending glissando on the A string with a downbow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>tambor</em> (snare drum)</td>
<td>plucking the G string with the right hand while the left hand middle finger is between the G and D strings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Additionally, Suárez Paz did not improvise these techniques. Rather, Piazzolla notated many of them in the score (Musical Example 4.4), implying that the violin part should be played as written.

Musical Example 4.4. “La camorra I” (Violin). Notation of Violin Gestures.150

Horacio Malvicino, Electric Guitar

Horacio Malvicino and Piazzolla first established an artistic collaboration in the 1950s with Piazzolla’s Octeto Buenos Aires. At that time, Malvicino, playing electric guitar, was the most controversial member of the ensemble from the perspective of the Argentine public. In addition to playing an instrument that was uncommon in a tango ensemble, Malvicino created passages and entire pieces, such as “Tangology,” that were largely devoted to improvisation. When Malvicino became a member of the second Quinteto, he did not compose any of his own music. Nevertheless, Piazzolla created many passages that featured him in an improvisatory role.151 For example in “La camorra I,” there is a large section at the end of the piece for improvised electric guitar as well as improvised piano.

Malvicino also performed gestures on the electric guitar that were similar to those on the violin. While the electric guitar did not use as many special effects and

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151 Malvicino was also a member of the first quintet. However, he played with the earlier group only briefly and was replaced by Oscar López Ruiz.
was limited to plucking the strings, it often doubled the violin in gestures such as *látigo*. In this case, Malvicino played a glissando and sustained the plucked tone for a slightly longer duration. Piazzolla also notated *golpes* (knocks) as well as *tambor* gestures for the instrument.

**Pablo Ziegler, Piano**

Pablo Ziegler received training in classical as well as jazz styles, and Argentine critics considered him an up-and-coming jazz pianist. When he joined the second *Quinteto*, he incorporated his jazz background into the performance practices of the ensemble. Piazzolla included passages for piano improvisation in works such as “La camorra I” and “La camorra III.” He also included cadenzas and extended solos to display Ziegler’s virtuosic ability, the most famous of which comes from the opening of “Adiós Nonino.”

However, Ziegler’s primary role was not to display soloistic virtuosity through improvisations or cadenzas, but rather to provide harmonic and rhythmic support. Therefore, his performance practices had to utilize the gestures that are inherent in the tango tradition. For example in “La camorra I,” Piazzolla writes a *marcato en dos* passage, which he indicates as “Pesante e molto Tanguissimo.” In listening to Ziegler, it is clear that he performed this passage in the style of Pugliese. He therefore had to use a very forceful attack with huge arm circles to play the low

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crash on the piano on beats two and four. In this case, beats two and four had accents that were more pronounced than the downbeats.

It was also Ziegler’s role to impose the signature tango tresillo, as well as other rhythmic patterns such as sincopa. To perform these gestures, Ziegler used a very sharp attack on the key; he also frequently included arrastres, which were similar to Piazzolla’s style of playing. Rather than using a predominance of finger and wrist technique, Ziegler often played with his arms and back, creating a heavier, fuller, and more percussive sound. In terms of contemporary performance practices, it is necessary for the modern performer to accentuate the signature rhythmic patterns of the genre in addition to the arrastres.

**Héctor Console, Bass**

In contrast to “Kicho” Díaz who was known for his metronomic playing, Héctor Console had a more fluid sense of rhythm. In pieces that were more gentle such as “Milonga del ángel,” Console created a sense of breadth by displacing beat four of the milonga pattern by a fraction of a second. He also had the ability to play a melodic role in the ensemble, as evidenced by the opening of “Contrabajismo.” In this case, his performance was characterized by the use of rubato and a malleable sense of time. Thus, it is important for contemporary performers to be aware of their roles within the ensemble and change their performance practices accordingly.

However, Console also incorporated the gestures used previously by Díaz. He played with a forceful arrastre emphasizing the portamento. He also accentuated the

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strappato gesture from the tango tradition. This gesture was not improvised but notated by Piazzolla (see Musical Example 4.5).

Musical Example 4.5. Notation of strappato from “La camorra I.”

Conclusions

While Piazzolla’s compositions represent a fusion of genres, the performance practices (and specifically the gestures) used in his second Quinteto are primarily associated with tango traditions. One can directly link the group’s use of rubato, vibrato, and string gestures to the escuela decareana. Thus, the yeites of Piazzolla’s ensemble encompass both the performance practices of the guardia vieja and guardia nueva. In addition, the CD titles themselves invoke imagery that has a semiotic relationship with his musical gestures and, by extension, his performance practices.

Each musician in the second Quinteto came from Argentina, where he was exposed to a lifetime of tango traditions. Thus, Argentine identity was the unifying factor of the ensemble. It is true that the musicians had interests and expertise in a variety of styles, which they incorporated into their playing. For example, Ziegler and Malvicino employed improvisation when indicated in the score. However, these improvisational passages did not define the essence of the ensemble’s performance practices.

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For these reasons, I would like to suggest that musicians, especially from the
United States, approach the interpretation of Piazzolla’s music from a tango
perspective. While it is still considered good taste for musicians from a jazz
background to include improvised passages, they should also strive to incorporate the
characteristic yeítes associated with the Argentine tango tradition. For example, one
must employ forceful arrastres and utilize rubato in the manner of the tango canción
tradition to render the style correctly.

It is also essential that performers of Piazzolla’s music be conscious of their
function within the ensemble. Each instrumental role yields specific gestures;
therefore, one must be aware whether one is supplying the melody or providing the
rhythmic foundation. In addition, one’s role might change between pieces or within a
piece, in which case the performer must adjust his or her gestures accordingly.

I do not believe that performers must emulate all of the performance practices
described in this chapter in order to recreate successfully the music of Piazzolla, but it
is imperative to be aware of the original practices. For example, while it is not
necessary for future performers to position themselves in the same configuration as in
the second Quinteto, it is advisable to place instruments with similar roles beside each
other. Certainly, bandoneonistas do not have to stand while playing Piazzolla’s
music, but nevertheless they do need to be cognizant that it was his upright position
that contributed to the persuasive musical rhetoric and dominance that he imposed on
his music. Ziegler’s more percussive style of playing may be well-suited for large
chamber ensembles (of five or more players), in which the rhythmic foundation must
penetrate through the overall sound. However, this practice may be unnecessary in
pieces for solo piano or instrumental duo, such as *Le Grand Tango*, in which the pianist supplies the rhythmic foundation for only one other musician.

To conclude, I advocate that musicians approach the performance practices of Piazzolla’s music through a reconstruction of the group’s gestures. By doing so, one not only renders a musical score, but also interprets the sound within its physical context. In essence, one is embodying the music. Through the emulation of gestures, I believe that it is possible to achieve the evocative and persuasive characteristics of *nuevo tango* performance practices. Moreover, such an approach will enrich the goal of fostering a culturally informed and holistic interpretation of Piazzolla’s music.
I. Literary Sources


II.  Musical Scores


III.  Audio/Video Sources


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