

ARGENTINE TANGO: A PERFORMER'S GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING THE  
GENRE

By

TOMÁS F. ESTIGARRIBIA

A LECTURE-DOCUMENT

Presented to the School of Music & Dance  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Doctor of Musical Arts

June 2026

"Argentine Tango: A Performer's Guide to Understanding the Genre," a Lecture-Document prepared by Tomás F. Estigarribia in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Doctor of Musical Arts degree in the School of Music. This Lecture-Document has been approved and accepted by:

Steve Pologe, Chair of the Examining Committee

Dr. Alejandro Vallega, Institutional Representative

Dr. Arnaud Ghillebaert, Core Member

Dr. Eduardo Wolf, Core Member

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                                                  |    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Abstract .....                                                   | 4  |
| List of Musical Examples.....                                    | 5  |
| Chapter 1. Introduction, Purpose, and Scope of Document.....     | 7  |
| Chapter 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework .....     | 13 |
| Chapter 3. Methodology .....                                     | 26 |
| Chapter 4. Core Elements of Tango Performance Practice .....     | 30 |
| 4.1 Common Rhythms, Grooves, .....                               | 30 |
| 4.2 Rhythmic versus Melodic Playing .....                        | 35 |
| 4.3 <i>Fraseso</i> , Ornamentation, and Expressive Freedom ..... | 39 |
| Chapter 5. Case Studies—Comparative Analysis .....               | 45 |
| 5.1 “Por una Cabeza” (Gardel, Goyeneche, and Riera) .....        | 45 |
| 5.2 “Oblivion” (Piazzolla versus Capuçon/Berthollet) .....       | 48 |
| Conclusion .....                                                 | 52 |
| Bibliography .....                                               | 54 |

## ABSTRACT

Tomás Estigarribia

Doctor Of Musical Arts

Department of Music

May 2026

Title: “Argentine Tango: A Performer’s Guide to Understanding the Genre”

Artists around the world have shown an interest in the Argentine tango, but some of the intricacies and details are left for the reader to investigate. This lecture document seeks to expand the content on performance practice and idioms within the Argentine Tango style. Analysis of transcribed material from famous Tango recordings will be used: “Por Una Cabeza” and “Oblivion” will be the centerpieces of the document, while a socio-historical background, combined with an exploration of the origins of Tango, will provide the content to dive into its style and performance practices, compared to the available sheet music.

By combining socio-historical context, in-depth interviews with seminal practitioners, and detailed comparative transcriptions of iconic recordings against published scores, this lecture-document provides classically trained musicians with practical tools to perform Argentine tango with greater authenticity and informed stylistic choices.

**List of musical examples**

|                                                                                                     |    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Figure 1: “Volver” (Tango) by Carlos Gardel.....                                                    | 26 |
| Figure 2 <i>Sincopa</i> example by Pablo Estigarribia.....                                          | 29 |
| Figure 3: <i>Marcato</i> example by Pablo Estigarribia.....                                         | 30 |
| Figure 4: 3+3+2 Example by Pablo Estigarribia .....                                                 | 31 |
| Figure 5: Example of how an expressive melody may be written.....                                   | 32 |
| Figure 6: Example of how a more rhythmic part may look.....                                         | 32 |
| Figure 7: Example that Gallo uses in his book to explain <i>fraseo</i> .....                        | 34 |
| Figure 8: A longer demonstration of how <i>fraseo</i> would change<br>What is written to tango..... | 34 |
| Figure 9: Illustration of how Tango is often transcribed.....                                       | 41 |
| Figure 10: Carlos Gardel “Por una cabeza” with <i>fraseo</i> .....                                  | 37 |
| Figure 11: Modern version of “Por una cabeza”.....                                                  | 38 |
| Figure 12: Piazzolla's “Oblivion”.....                                                              | 43 |
| Figure 13: Piazzolla's solo on bandoneon.....                                                       | 45 |
| Figure 14: Piazzolla's Second solo the second time in the same session.....                         | 45 |
| Figure 15: Side-by-side comparison of Oblivion’s versions.....                                      | 46 |
| Figure 16: “El Choclo” .....                                                                        | 47 |

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to thank the unbelievable guidance of the amazing artists Pablo Estigarribia and Ramiro Gallo, who not only through their books but also their amazing personalities and excitement for Tango inspired me to further and pointed me in the direction of multiple resources. It is highly significant that these performers chose to share some of the practices of tango that were kept oral for a long time. I want to thank my brother Pablo and my parents for their unwavering support through the years and for sharing their ears with me every time I discover new information about tango. I deeply appreciate the support of every member of the committee and for taking the time to review and offer feedback on this document. Lastly, I want to thank my professor, Steve Pologe, for his unwavering support over the years.

*“Argentine Tango: A Performer’s Guide to Understanding the Genre”*

**Chapter 1. Introduction, Purpose, and Scope of Document**

**I. INTRODUCTION**

A documentary on tango narrated by actor Robert Duvall showcases the way tango is portrayed in the media for foreigners. This way of portraying tango wraps it in mystique; the actor Robert Duvall narrates, “It is Argentina's national dance. It is called the tango. The tango is a dance that defies description. It can be fast or slow, intricately choreographed, or completely improvised.”<sup>1</sup> Duvall’s assertion that tango ‘defies description’ overlooks the historical and methodological factors that have complicated its study. Additionally, Marta E. Savigliano, in her book *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*, claims “The history of the tango is a story of encounter between those who should never have met”<sup>2</sup>, also giving tango an air of mysticism that, according to both my experts in the field interviewed, is not necessarily true. Gallo, a renowned tango musician and pedagogue, interviewed for the purpose of this document, said in his interview, “They sometimes make it sound as if in order to play tango you are supposed to be set on fire with passion. Yes, tango demands these things, but tango is more than that. Tango is a dance, its poetry, its music, it's all of those things combined”. What Gallo is referring to is that often the way non-*tangueros* approach tango reduces it to just one aspect present in this genre, which is multifaceted, adding to the difficulty already present because of other factors. Tango is not indescribable; rather, its oral transmission and evolving social

---

<sup>1</sup> Films for the Humanities & Sciences, Films Media Group, and National Geographic Television & Film, *Tango!* (New York, N.Y: Films Media Group, 1993), streaming video, accessed November 11, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Marta E. Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995)

contexts have made it difficult for foreign observers and researchers to capture its full complexity. The challenge lies in access and interpretation, not in the nature of tango itself. My unique perspective—as a classically trained musician exposed at a young age to tango, a genre usually inadequately notated for those outside the tradition—forms the impetus for this project, which aims to formalize the oral tradition for classically trained musicians.

This project will utilize different musical and socio-historical lenses to shed light on tango performance practice, history, and style. In the musical context, I will use both practical and historical sources to explain how the style morphed through the years. Lastly, I will contrast it with how Western classical musicians approach this style, highlighting the specific improvisational techniques and expressive nuances that an experienced tango player might employ.

Having grown up in Argentina as a brother to a well-connected and accomplished tango pianist, I had a unique access to hear extremely fine tango players live. I also participated in the recording and touring of the album “*Apologia del Tango*.” As a result, my awareness of fine tango playing was enhanced. Upon arriving in the United States, I observed many accomplished musicians trained in the classical Western tradition who employed performance practices that deviated from the established Argentine traditions, particularly when playing Piazzolla. Tango musicians often describe such performances as *tocar cuadrado* (playing “square”) or *no tiene onda* (lacking stylistic “flow” or “groove”),<sup>3</sup> which means there is no swing, a unique term that parallels jazz music, which originated in the United States.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ramiro Gallo, *El Violín en el Tango / The Violin in Tango: Edición bilingüe* (Español / Inglés) (Buenos Aires: Tango Sin Fin Ediciones, 2017), 66–68.

This left me wondering why these great artistically minded players were playing in such a manner. The answer was clear when I got to observe the arrangements being performed, and what was notated in the music. A plethora of articulation errors, expression markings, and lack of instruction. Then, when I attempted to explain why it should sound a certain way, what kind of gesture it is, the performers dismissed it as “it is not written in the sheet music”. In the new American and German school of music making, there is an overarching idea that what is on the page is seen as *vera veritas*. These schools share a *zeitgeist* that is decidedly literal in how they experience the relationship between sheet music and its sound. However, it is crucial to recognize that even modern classical pedagogy retains an element of oral tradition; for instance, a musician would not execute an eighth note followed by an eighth rest in a work by Shostakovich in the same manner as they would the identical rhythmic gesture in Mozart.

Part of it is related to how the tango tradition has developed and found its way to the modern world. Many tango traditions remain as oral only, such that one must learn via direct instruction or apprenticeship under one of the great “*Maestros*” (*Maestros* referring to the most significant tango artists and performers). This relates directly to why the few published tango scores (often transcriptions by foreigners interested in the genre) are littered with mistakes. In the 1960s and 1970s, various Russian theorists tried to transcribe the music from recordings and performances, but they largely failed to capture its improvisatory essence. As a result, a more fixed and standardized (often overly rigid) style of playing tango developed abroad. Even when foreigners performed the music

---

brilliantly, anyone familiar with the tradition could instantly hear who was not trained in Argentina or immersed in the Buenos Aires tango scene.

In order to address all these questions and ideas, I will utilize multiple books from Argentina on tango performance in violin and piano as sources. This will offer practical ideas for the performer to include in their Argentine tango performances. Subsequent sections will analyze several of the historical prongs and components related to tango in Argentina, its history and evolution up to the *nuevo tango*, through careful analysis of recordings, sheet music, and historically well-known pieces. This will allow for a comparison of their differences and how one would modify their performance to make it more consistent with the tango aesthetic.

## II. PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF DOCUMENT

The primary objective of this document is to provide performers access to performance practice information that has remained somewhat hidden as it relates to the Argentine tango. While there are multiple different tangos from different countries, for the purpose of this document, I will focus on Argentine Tango. I will be looking at diverse sources, musicological, historical, practical, and analysis of key figures in tango to give the classical musician the chance to understand the style in-depth.

Tango is a style fundamentally characterized by individuality, improvisation, and numerous distinctive sub-styles, which makes it particularly difficult to reduce to a lecture-document. In the interest of reasonable brevity, I will not be able to exhaustively address every stylistic lineage from each *orquesta tipica* (Each *orquesta tipica* pride

themselves on their unique style and arrangement) or key figures because there are too many and too varied to describe and explain within the confines of this document.

To understand the duality of Tango, one must understand that, in broad terms, there are two dimensions of playing: rhythmic and melodic. While melodic is the dimension of playing that has suffered the most from oral tradition, it is specifically known for its freedom and similarity to singing, within the Tango aesthetic. This is especially evident by the time “*Nuevo Tango*” arrived with Piazzolla, there was an introduction to a rubato style directly related to poetry and with similarities to what Western academia refers to as “*Sprechstimme*.” The best example of this is Roberto Goyeneche (a key figure in Tango for his lengthy and successful career) performing Piazzolla’s “Balada para un loco” with some parts of spoken words unfurling into a more sung style as the piece progresses.

The juxtaposition of the Tango style found in Goyeneche's versions of the classic of “Por una Cabeza” in contrast to the original from Carlos Gardel reveals the speaking-singing style that came to be more the standard performance practice of tango, whether it was being sung or played on instruments. This level of push and pull with rhythm is often expected of performers to really bring out the expression in the music, while the principal beats should still be able to be followed, the rhythm is less an absolute truth and more just suggestions, especially if it's a tango that was originally sung. Tango singers, when they perform, take liberties to emphasize parts of the text. Similar to how poetry can be read in different ways to emphasize distinct parts of the text, such is the case in tango. Furthermore, in instrumental music, it is often observed that important solos and

melodies are usually notated as whole notes or an extremely simplified version. For non-*tangueros*, this is taken literally as that being the melody; however, one should often treat it more as a Cantus Firmus to build on, adding ornaments, turns, or extra notes as long as one maintains the harmony and general melodic contour. Similarly, there is a concept in jazz music called “walking the bass line,” where the bass player just has to land on the harmonic changes and maintain the harmony in between; everything else is up to the performer. While walking, the bassline also has to maintain the rhythmic component/subdivision. Expressive tango playing is not tied to a constant rhythmic structure, and shortening or lengthening the bar can be done if the performer wants to add tension or anxiety. Furthermore, the rhythmic integrity and structure are usually kept in the accompaniment.

The complexity of tango encompasses multiple sub-genres that exist within this bigger entity of tango, such as *milonga*, *vals criollo*, *nuevo tango*, *canyengue*, to name a few. Each one has its unique characteristics; a lot of *Nuevo Tango* in the era of Piazzolla has the characteristic rhythm of “*el candombe*” (3+3+2). Regardless of subgenre, tango demands a sense of stylistic “groove” analogous, though not identical to jazz.

My method to discover all these intricacies about the music performance practice in tango, several accomplished tango players have agreed to be interviewed and discuss firsthand how it is done, what the components are, and stylistic do’s and don’ts. These interviews will be transcribed in full and then attached to the document to be able to reference them throughout the paper. This research method allows academia to mitigate the barrier of oral tradition.

In the lecture-document, I will examine several excerpts (such as “Oblivion” by Piazzolla) that will give us a concise illustration of how Tango performers would typically perform a solo of that melody, as well as what they added or subtracted from the written score.

## **Chapter 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

### **MUSICOLOGICAL BACKGROUND**

This document will utilize diverse types of sources to address several aspects, while still taking a holistic approach; these sources are often very specialized in a specific aspect. For the section on historical and sociological aspects, I will utilize different books by Jorge Strada,<sup>4</sup> Carlos Vega<sup>5</sup> and Kacey Link and Kristin Wendland<sup>6</sup>. It is crucial to have native sources from Argentina as well as foreigners to see how each culture digests the tango style.

A unique asset of these sources is their insight into tango evolution and several types of tango based on the years that they lived. Argentina has a very tumultuous history in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, with multiple dictatorships, financial crashes, and even

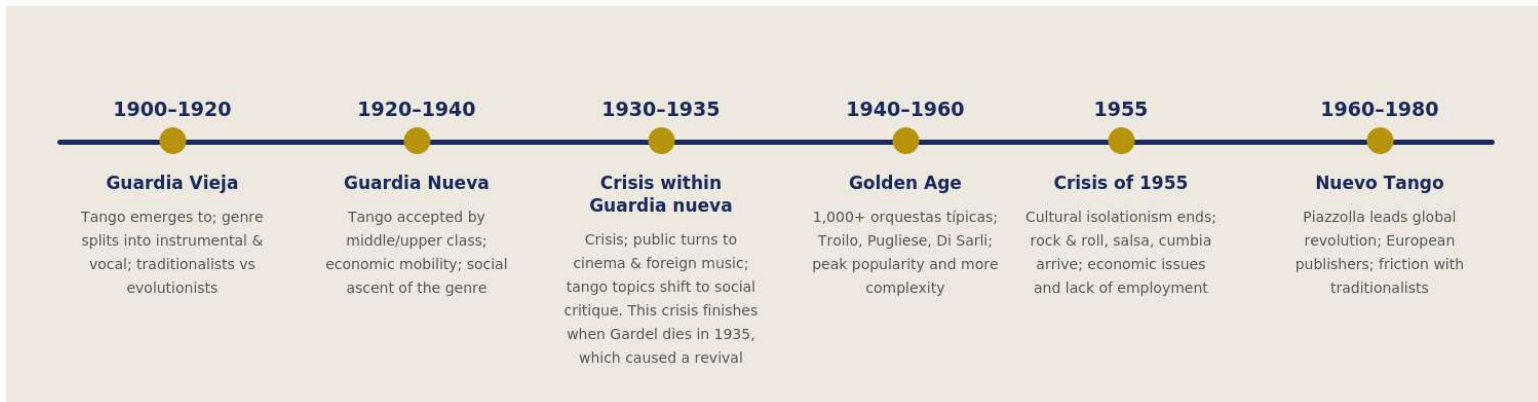
---

<sup>4</sup> Jorge Strada and José Bragato, José Bragato: *recuerdos y relatos en diálogos* (Mar del Plata, Argentina: Ediciones Suárez, 2006) and Jorge Strada, *Historia orientativa del tango: 1880-1995* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Fundación Papelnonos, 1995)

<sup>5</sup> Carlos Vega, *Estudios para los orígenes del tango argentino*, 2nd corrected ed., ed. Coriún Aharonián (Buenos Aires: Universidad Católica Argentina, Instituto de Investigación Musicológica “Carlos Vega,” 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Kacey Link and Kristin Wendland, *Tracing Tangueros: Argentine Tango Instrumental Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

wars.<sup>7</sup> This historical context helps explain the significant social unrest that shaped the evolution of tango and the emergence of stylistic tendencies. I will also utilize the biography of José Bragato, a famous tango cellist who played, arranged, and composed alongside Piazzolla. While the book mainly has a lot of personal anecdotes, many of these personal anecdotes can be used to paint a broader picture of the times and what was happening during these different decades. This source will also help get firsthand accounts of Piazzolla's working methods and the specific demands of *Nuevo Tango* ensembles. Carlos Vega and Strada will be my main historical sources because of their thoroughness and because they are both local Argentinians who have written about tango while in Buenos Aires or Mar del Plata.



“The history of tango is as elusive as the history of the Argentine people.

Argentina is a country made up of persons claiming a mixture of, among others, Italian, Spanish, British, Basque, Irish, German, African, and native ancestry, with many shadings of caste and class. Unlike the United States, where a variety of ethnic identities can be preserved and hyphenated with “American,” Argentina is a country whose people

<sup>7</sup> Referring to coups in 1930, 1943, 1955, 1962, 1966, 1976, Guerra de Malvinas(1982), and economical crashes in the 1990s and 2001.

merged their various heritages with that of the native population to create a common Argentine identity. Unlike the United States, where native populations were driven out, early European arrivals to Argentina or absorbed most native groups into the new society they built. However, Buenos Aires was stratified economically, and the least urbanized natives were rapidly disenfranchised. At the same time, the various separate European threads quickly merged in the *porteño*, or citizen of the port city.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it is critical to note that Baim’s assertion entirely elides pivotal socio-political and public health crises—namely, the Conquista del Desierto, a military campaign that expanded national territory through the violent displacement of indigenous populations, and the devastating yellow fever epidemic of 1871—both of which affected disenfranchised groups.

The Tango originated as instrumental music, mostly played in the ports of Buenos Aires at the beginning of the 20th century. There is a plethora of influences and subgenres, ranging from African, indigenous, Spanish, and Western European (like the presence of the Bandoneon, a German Instrument which started to arrive more actively after World War I, which was the first massive way of European migration to Argentina). There is some discourse about the origin of the word Tango itself. Some people suggest it’s African in nature, from the Ibibio word “*Tamgu*”; on the other hand, Carlos Vega suggests that the word "Tango" itself is derived from the Latin verb *tangere*, meaning "to touch"<sup>9</sup>. While a lot of people relate this idea of “to touch” to the dance and the intimate nature of it, in Latin-derived languages, it is still common practice to say, for example, in

---

<sup>8</sup> Jo Baim, *Tango: Creation of a Cultural Icon* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Carlos Vega, *Estudios para los orígenes del tango argentino*, 2nd corr. ed., ed. Coriún Aharonián (Buenos Aires: Universidad Católica Argentina, Instituto de Investigación Musicológica “Carlos Vega,” 2016).

Spanish, “Yo Toco el Cello.” A literal translation would make it sound like someone is touching the cello. Still, depending on the context, it could also mean playing the instrument. Regardless, the influence of African rhythms is undeniable, with the inclusion of typical rhythms from *candombe*, *milonga*, and *canyengue*. Because of this rich mix of backgrounds, the Tango found itself with European instrumentation accompanied by indigenous and African rhythms. Therefore, due to cultural exchange, a rich new genre was born. Over time, it gained such global appeal that it became internationally acclaimed, even penetrating the Iron Curtain. Tango was first used to musicalize brothels and bars in ports. The upper class considered tango vulgar and indecorous; needless to say, the lack of distance between the dancers in the time was considered extremely personal and sexual. In the 1900s, the word Tango was considered inappropriate, and when “El Choclo” was premiered, it was first introduced as a *baile criollo* (*creole* dance), instead of Tango as we know it. Tango operates as a unified cultural construct, wherein a single signifier simultaneously embodies the distinct mediums of dance, music, and poetry.

Argentinian history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is one that is full of changes, often with alternations between dictatorships and democratic governments. The first two decades of the century were a start of change, when electoral fraud was very common. This, through the several enacted laws and the mandatory secret vote, gave way to the first Radical government of Yrigoyen. During these years, Argentina also started receiving a lot of Europeans trying to escape World War I. The next significant historical fact (for the purposes of tango history) is the first military coup d’etat, when General Urriburu removes democratically elected president Yrigoyen from power, and the *decada infame* (infamous

decade) begins, characterized by political persecution and economic difficulties. With the beginning of the Second World War, Argentina was forced by the conflict to adopt protectionism, economic and cultural isolationism, which gave way to the full flourish of the Tango Golden Age. The demand for tango was so broad and popular that there were thousands of Orquestas Tipicas performing all around the country. After the war ended, Argentina was all of the sudden flooded by the “music business”, like Jazz and Rock, which displaced Tango from the main scene.

The first ever record of a Tango ensemble was a very strange mix of harp or guitar, Clarinet or flute, and violin. However, no recordings from this time survived, but it is assumed that they played shorter and faster, which then changed with the arrival and integration of the Bandonion or Bandoneón( an instrument first designed for religious services as a portable harmonium). The next familiar ensemble was a sextet, composed of 2 violins, 2 bandoneons, a double bass, and a piano. As the years went by, tango became more popular and, with the need for stronger sonorities, ensembles evolved, increasing the number of players on stage, giving place to the *orquesta tipica* instrumentation, which represents this melting pot of ideas. The formation of this emerging ensemble was: 4 violins, viola, cello, 4 bandoneons, double bass, and piano. The piano and bass were expected to be the Rhythm section and responsible for keeping tempo and the groove of the band itself. The Pugliese typical orchestra was the first one to expand it to a string quartet.

Tango was slowly evolving more and more, going past several key eras of tango, such as the *Guardia Vieja* and *Guardia Nueva*, ultimately arriving at the Golden era of Tango in the 1950s. It is important to consider the range of years because of the turbulent

Argentine history found during these years. Tango took a long time to become what Argentina is known for. Nowadays, outside of Argentina, when someone mentions Tango, people immediately think of Astor Piazzolla or Carlos Gardel. However, Piazzolla didn't rise to international fame until the 1960s, during which time he collided with the established Tango artists. The Tango establishment critics contended that Piazzolla's shift toward French harmonies and counterpoint reflected a troubling abandonment of artistic and national identity in favor of foreign complexity. The idea of "Argentineity" did not have Tango at the forefront, but instead had more focus on the already established and decorous folk dances (*chacarera*, *zamba*, *gato*, etc). Tango became increasingly significant within the country, fueled by rising social mobility, state modernization, and a favorable economic climate. Concurrently, the genre's arrival in Europe—where French society became infatuated with it—garnered broad domestic acceptance, as European validation elevated its status amongst the high society back home. The evolution to the "Guardia Vieja (1900-1920)," which helped kickstart the evolution of tango and the *orquesta típica*, where the genre divides itself between instrumental and tango with lyrics. However, the instrumental tango is subdivided into two currents: **traditionalists** (who prioritize rhythm to service the dance, for example, Juan D'Arienzo and Francisco Canaro) and **evolutionists** (who prioritize melodic and harmonic complexity and Tango, for example, figures like Francisco or Julio De Caro). **Tango with Lyrics** is mostly focused on topics of romance, nostalgia, and the figure of the *porteño*<sup>10</sup>. The *Guardia Nueva* (1920-1940) is when Tango stops being a musical expression of at-risk neighborhoods and lower social classes and slowly becomes accepted into more privileged social circles, which had previously rejected

---

<sup>10</sup> Jorge Strada, *Historia orientativa del tango: 1880-1995* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Fundación Papelnonos, 1995), [Insert Page Number].

it because it was too vulgar. This era is characterized by economic success and social mobility, which helped cement the success of Tango. 1930 to 1935 was a time of crisis for tango that was accompanied by an economic crisis and electoral fraud, often called “*Decada infame*,” where the aristocracy ruled by force and fear. This produces the first significant exodus of farmers into the city in search of work. During those five years, the public started being interested in other ways of entertainment, some by foreign music, for others it was the novelty of cinema with sound. Strada writes in his book *Historia Ilustrativa del Tango*, “Tango was becoming a memory, an archeological subject matter... Tango had stopped its development... This is the time of reminiscing, where the *porteño* used to be the main protagonist; they have now turned into a simple spectator.” During this time, there is an evident pivot in the topics written in Tango with lyrics, where most of them change to social critique and unrest within society. A perfect example of this is the tango *Cambalache* by Julio Sosa.

Que el mundo fue y sera una porqueria,  
ya lo se...  
En el quinientos seis  
y en el dos mil también!

Que siempre ha habido chorros,  
maquiavelos y estafaos,  
contentos y amargaos,  
valores y dublés...

Pero que el siglo veinte  
es un despliegue  
de maldad insolente  
ya no hay quien lo niegue.

Vivimos revolcaos en un merengue  
y en un mismo lodo  
todos manoseaos...

Hoy resulta que es lo mismo  
ser derecho que traidor..!  
Ignorante, sabio, chorro,  
generoso o estafador!

Todo es igual! Nada es mejor!  
Lo mismo un burro  
que un gran profesor!  
No hay aplazaos ni escalafón,  
los inmorales nos han igualao.

Si uno vive en la impostura  
y otro roba en su ambición,  
da lo mismo que sea cura,  
colchonero, rey de bastos,  
caradura o polizón...

That the world was and always be filth,  
I already know...  
In the year five hundred and six  
and in the year two thousand too!

There always have been thieves,  
traitors and victims of fraud,  
happy and bitter people,  
valuables and imitations

But, that the twentieth century  
is a display  
of insolent malice,  
nobody can deny it anymore.

We lived sunk in a fuzz  
and in the same mud  
all well-worn...

Today it happens it is the same  
to be decent or a traitor!  
To be an ignorant, a genius, a pickpocket,  
a generous person or a swindler!

All is the same! Nothing is better!  
They are the same, an idiot donkey  
and a great professor!  
There are no failing grades or merit valuations,  
the immoral have caught up with us.

If one lives in a pose  
and another, in his ambition, steals,  
it's the same if it's a priest,  
a mattress maker, a king of clubs,  
a cad or a tramp.

*Post-Guardia Nueva* (1940-1960), often referred to as the “Golden Age of Tango,” was kick-started by the tragic death of Carlos Gardel in 1935, which turned the Argentine public back into Tango. The *Post-Guardia Nueva* showed significant development in the genre, in topics, complexity, number of instruments, and an increase in popularity. During this time, it is estimated that there were over a thousand *orquestas típicas* active in Argentina, which made the space much more competitive and pushed ensembles to strive for a unique sound and demand a higher level of music making. Some key figures from this period are Troilo, Pugliese, and Di Sarli, among others. However, at the end of this period, Tango suffered another crisis in 1955 with the arrival of other genres. Cultural isolationism ends, and Argentina starts importing other genres that can be danced, such as rock and roll, and other tropical rhythms such as salsa and cumbia. The other big conflict is, yet again, economic issues and lack of employment.

From 1960 to 1980, the genre called “Nuevo Tango” emerged with Piazzolla at the forefront. Piazzolla studied under Alberto Ginastera and subsequently Nadia Boulanger in Paris—who famously catalyzed the discovery of his distinct tango voice—yet he already possessed an established career as both a performer and arranger for Aníbal Troilo’s *Orquesta Típica*. Following this pivotal European period, Piazzolla began publishing his compositions with prominent European houses, including Aldo Pagani and Éditions Henry Lemoine. This was due mostly because of the better financial reward, but also because of the rejection of Piazzolla’s music by the biggest figures of tango. In an interview, Piazzolla himself is recorded saying that his music is actually not Tango, as a way to appease the traditionalist movement within Tango. This is very important information because of the lack of publishing there is from the *orquestas típicas* from the

time, which might be responsible for the Piazzolla publishing outside of the country.

Another important aspect to consider as it relates to Tango is the few manuscripts that are published or at least available, which are often deficient at portraying the music that is supposed to be played or assumes that the player just knows how to achieve the required sound, ornaments, or rhythms.

There is a parallel to the French Baroque, where, in the music itself, there are unclear instructions on how this is supposed to be played to the untrained performer in this genre. The player should instead be well versed in the available treatises, such as Muffat or Couperin, where this is expanded. To understand the interpretive leniency required of the performer, one may construct a historical parallel with the French Baroque convention of notes *inégaies* (or *inégalite*). Within this early music paradigm, texturally uniform chains of written eighth notes do not signify the rigid, egalitarian divisions of duration standard in modern Western notation; rather, they serve as schematic templates for a nuanced, inherently fluid alteration of time. This structural dichotomy shares a profound aesthetic framework with Argentine tango, wherein a lyrical line is frequently marked by the sole directive “*fraseado*,” an explicit mandate to engage in *fraseo*. Far from a superficial manipulation of tempo, this instruction signals that the literal values on the page must be treated merely as descriptive guidelines, liberating the soloist to fundamentally morph the rhythm to emulate the cadence of the human voice or the distinct speech patterns of the *porteño* accent. However, this doesn’t mean just that, but there is a specific way that the rhythm should morph to represent the emphasis in the words, if it’s adapted from a song with lyrics or simulating the *porteño* (Buenos Aires) accent. Furthermore, this conceptual parallel extends to the application of ornaments

within traditional tango idioms, presenting an intriguing paradox when contrasted with French Baroque performance practice. While French Baroque notation and its contemporary treatises provide a relatively codified taxonomy for ornamental execution, tango notation remains significantly more ambiguous. Nevertheless, both traditions are bound by a shared performance philosophy: the written score serves merely as a schematic guide, operating under the explicit expectation that the player must exercise improvisatory latitude, introducing ornaments organically to heighten the rhetorical affect of the melodic line.

## **PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS**

The practical aspect of the project will be based on the work of Ramiro Gallo and Pablo Estigarribia, their interviews, YouTube videos, and published books. These are key works as it refers to the tango style and performance practice. While both are valuable to this document, they have slightly different approaches, Estigarribia's book. "Tango de Concierto"<sup>11</sup> presents a distilled collection of tangos for the concert pianist who may not have heard about the tango style at all. This is why he will be instrumental to the document, since he had to modify and adapt to writing in the more "classical" style to make it clear to non-tango players how it should be played. While he does not address the idea of improvising, he does provide a unique contrast to how the original pieces are notated.

---

<sup>11</sup> Pablo Estigarribia, *Tangos de Concierto: Concert Hall Tango* (Buenos Aires: Published by the author, 2017).

Gallo, on the other hand, provides an insight into his instructional style and how to interpret the tango notation into the proper style. The approach is different but complementary, given that it is a different instrument from the specialization of Estigarribia. Gallo elucidates the intricacies of interpreting tango notation by demonstrating how stylistic conventions manifest in written scores, and how to perform it in the style of Argentine Tango. Gallo explains many of the sub-genres (*milonga*, *vals criollo*, *canyengue*... etc.)<sup>12</sup> within Argentine tango, which, in combination with the interviews and the books by Vega and Strada, will provide a description, historical context, and practical advice on how to identify these styles on sheet music and how to properly perform them, and where the groove is.

### III. AURAL AND SCORE ANALYSIS

This document will perform multiple analyses of different key figures in tango, such as Astor Piazzolla, Gardel, and Goyeneche. Furthermore, the document will compare it to famous classical performers' interpretations of these Tangos and how the composers themselves perform the same work. I will also transcribe the examples in order to be precise while examining the variations between these pieces. The first to analyze will be “Por Una Cabeza” which gained worldwide renown after its feature in the 1992 movie “Scent of a Woman” starring Al Pacino where the version heard is not performed by people familiar with the tango tradition, since it is played square with no *fraseo*, with habanera rhythms (which were no longer used), and with accordion; All these characteristics point to a caricature of tango as opposed to an informed

---

<sup>12</sup> Gallo, *El Violín en el Tango*, 136–146.

performance. This is one of the main reasons to use this broadly known tango as a subject of study, to debunk the broadly distributed version by Hollywood. Contrasting between Gardel and Goyeneche, utilizing the famous “Por una Cabeza,” has the objective of highlighting stylistic transformations from its earlier years to the era of “Nuevo Tango.”<sup>13</sup> This is not only to talk about style but also to delve into the freedom expected from tango players when performing in the aforementioned expressive manner. Unlike most music in the canon of the concert hall circuits, tango often requires the player to deviate from what is on the page to really capture the essence of the piece. This is why the example of Goyeneche’s has similarities to the *Sprechstimme* found in music like Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire*, which is key to discussing how singers emphasize the text over the written rhythms.

Goyeneche is the clearest example of this freedom to emphasize the text; often, it seems as if he weaves in between spoken word and singing. The instrumentalist is left with the task of emphasizing the melody the same way, allowing for a lot of rhythmic freedom within the bigger frame from bar to bar. Similarly, this study conducts a comparative analysis contrasting Gautier Capuçon’s and Camille Berthollet’s performance of “Oblivion” with Piazzolla’s own execution of this iconic solo. While Piazzolla’s solo interpretations naturally evolved throughout the decades of his career, certain foundational characteristics remained unchanged. Highlighting these features serves to expose how elite classical artists approach notation in comparison to the stylized, improvisatory flexibility of a seasoned tango player. To ground this discussion, the solo section has been transcribed to provide direct visual comparisons of both scores

---

<sup>13</sup> Strada, *Historia orientativa del tango*, 75–89

and highlight their primary expressive differences. Ultimately, a veteran tango performer approaches the printed melody as a *cantus firmus*, freely altering rhythms and introducing ornaments while preserving the core melodic contour.

The degree of this creative liberty found in performances often varies depending on how many years an ensemble has performed together. An initial audition of the performance by Gautier Capuçon and Camille Berthollet reveals a strict adherence to the literal text of the score. In stark contrast, when analyzing Astor Piazzolla's execution of the identical melodic line, one observes an organic, improvisatory elasticity; his delivery possesses a spontaneous, compositional fluidity characterized by unexpected melodic turns and irregular accentuations that deliberately bypass the conventional beats of the measure. This juxtaposition serves as a definitive illustration of how a seasoned tango master utilizes *rubato* and ornamentation. Naturally, these interpretive choices fluctuate depending on instrumentation. While traditional performance practice dictated that instrumentalists emulate the expressive lyricism of the human voice, recent decades have seen a stylistic shift toward imitating the percussive articulations and idioms of the bandoneon.

Despite increased scholarly attention to Argentine tango in recent decades, no study has yet offered a comprehensive translation of its oral performance conventions into practical terms for classically trained musicians. The only available source is by publisher *SinFin*, which has methods for piano, violin, and guitar. By combining historical-discographic analysis, ethnographic testimony from contemporary masters, and detailed comparative transcriptions, this document contributes to filling this void.

Beyond improving the authenticity of tango performance in the concert hall, this project has broader pedagogical implications: it reintroduces principles of improvisational freedom and expressive individuality that were once central to Western art music training but have largely disappeared from contemporary classical practice. In this sense, the study of Argentine tango could become a vehicle for rediscovering a more interpretive, rather than purely reproductive, approach to the score.

It is key to have this multi-pronged approach that allows us to understand this style, and why it is played the way it is. While there has been some scholarly work discussing the performance practice of tango, no study has yet taken the leap of attempting to decipher the style and the performance practices at large. Rather, the existing literature is often reduced to a single piece or a maximum of 3 pieces, with the best performance advice being “The first advice for anyone who is interested in playing tangos is to try to listen to recordings done by Argentines or by people who have been involved with the style and know the way it should be performed.”<sup>14</sup>

The purpose of this lecture is to address the core principles underlying the Argentine tango style, while there will be some reference to the great key figures of tango, it will also provide concrete examples and comparisons. Explaining and distilling the style is only the first part to utterly understanding the genre, taking lessons, experimentation, and trial and error. This is partly why it has also been elusive to classical musicians, since the culture of improvisation has diminished markedly in contemporary classical practice.

---

<sup>14</sup> Ysomar Granados, "*A Pianist's Guide to the Argentine Tango*" (DmA diss., University of Miami, 2001), 45-46, ProQuest (304702874).

In the classical music world today, musicians are tied to the page and the page to the musician. This contrasts with the artistic ideals found in the Baroque, where improvisation was everywhere. As previously established in Chapter 2, this shared philosophy mirrors the French baroque, while the harmonic and rhythmic language are vastly different. Furthermore, one could also make the case that tango is not only tied to baroque but also to jazz music, and while much less involved in the improvisatory aspect, it still coins some of the terms and style.

It is my desire that tango is performed more and more in the Argentine style, since I believe it would not only be an interesting prospect but also, pedagogically speaking, there is something special for performers about finding your improvisatory voice, which I find makes more convincing performers of all music.

### **Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY**

This project will be done with the close cooperation of Tango figures Pablo Estigarribia and Ramiro Gallo, in conjunction with my own transcriptions and comparisons to existing arrangements and published tango music in Academia. The framework will be a direct comparison and possibilities of what can be done to sound more “*tanguero*.” To provide even further context for the reader, I will also include a short story of the evolution of tango and how it relates to the Argentine socio-historical events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ramiro Gallo’s book *Violin in the Tango* is one of the main sources because he is one of the first Tango writers to translate and set up a structure and system to better play tango. While still encouraged to learn from a tango master directly, this project will allow a classical musician to garner a basic understanding of the concepts surrounding tango.

The framework set up focuses mainly on violin and piano playing because they are the few instruments for which performance-related guidelines are currently available. Because of this, some of the elements presented in this document may be only partly applicable to other instruments (e.g., other stringed instruments, such as cello or contrabass). My examples are mostly from the golden age of tango (because of dancing) and nuevo tango (because it became a global phenomenon), which seem to be the eras of tango that most interest foreigners outside Argentina. For brevity’s sake, I won’t be able to observe, delve, or discuss the Tango movement in other countries.

Tango became a popular dance worldwide and found itself with its multiple variations and some hubs in the Americas, particularly Colombia, specifically the region of Medellin, because of the renowned Tango figure Carlos Gardel’s passing in that city.

The tango legacy continued even after his passing, where currently there is a prominent tango festival that takes place in his memory, as well as a museum in tribute to him.

However, there are some variations that I will not delve into. Similarly, both Pablo Estigarribia and Ramiro Gallo said that Portland (Reed College) was also one of the biggest hubs in the US (where they have taught), although they weren't completely sure of how long these hubs were active with tango, but they did point out that the main interest from foreigners is not the music, but instead the dance.

This explains why there is a fascination with older tangos that are more danceable. To establish a rigorous foundation for this direct comparison, select seminal recordings were closely analyzed, thereby providing the empirical groundwork to map these rhythmic divergences within the subsequent musical examples. These, combined with some of Gallo's and Estigarribia's examples, offer a unique insight into some of the main features of tango. This document will also mention just the necessary decades of tango and their characteristics in order to understand how it is played, rather than an exhaustive encyclopedia of tango background; this has been done before by Vega and Strada, among others. This document is mostly interested in distilling some of the tango customs into a way that is digestible and understood by a classical musician.

#### **Chapter 4. THE INTERVIEWS**

Tango was born as popular music for a dance; it has multiple rules that are not quite the same as classical music. Both interviewees agreed that the main problem stems from a lack of standardized publishing for *orquesta típica* notation. Historically, tango ensembles functioned through oral traditions and localized, handwritten arrangements. As a result, the genre faces an ongoing structural challenge when trying to compete with or integrate into the deeply score-driven traditions of classical music performance. Pablo Estigarribia shared that a lot of the music from the golden era of Tango was never really published, partly because of the abundance of *orquestas típicas*. This prompted them to compete and to look for their own sound and arrangements that would make them stand out from the rest, but never publishing them. Estigarribia cautions new tango players to taking arranged scores too literally, he claims that most times the arranger or transcriber is not tango trained, which means there is inaccuracies one should ignore, for example, a walking bass marcato written with dots in a Tango context is not correct and sounds odd, so one should ignore those markings but also sometimes there are things that are not written in the arrangement and one should definitely play them. Estigarribia also highlights that in Tango is the only popular Latin American dance music where the singer is never singing with the beats, unlike other popular dances from the time (bossa-nova, salsa).

The few scores available are mostly transcribed or arranged by ear until Piazzolla published his first piece, which at that time was a landmark in Tango history. Gallo then highlighted one of the differences between the style of the D'Arienzo orchestra, where all

4 beats would be accentuated (making it sound faster), contrastingly, the Di Sarli orchestra would accentuate 1 and 3 (making it sound slightly slower to the listener). Pablo Estigarribia believes that, surprisingly, Tango should be easier to access for classical musicians than other genres like Jazz. Estigarribia said the most common difficulties he saw from foreigners starting to learn Tango, in the case of the piano, he argues that it is mostly related to time, especially since the piano as an instrument plays solo a lot of the time, allowing for a lot of rhythmic flexibility. In Tango, however, this is much more restricted when playing rhythmic parts; you must be like a metronome and cannot take rhythmic freedoms. He claims that the easiest way to tell when somebody is not a tango player would be, for example, listening to someone play a rhythmic part followed by a *ritardando* and *diminuendo*. That would be a giveaway that the person playing is not an experienced Tango player. Furthermore, he says the piano has even more rhythmic responsibility, it must be extremely clear and predictable. He claims that he often tries to have his students record themselves and then clap along with their own recording. If it's not predictable, they must try again until their *rubato* is easy to follow. Estigarribia then talks about how when you do a *rubato* in Tango, you do *rubato* but at the same time on time, which seems like a contradiction in its own terms. But he highlighted that, for example, when the piano is soloing, often the bass is playing *stretto*(strict) and accurately, so the *rubato* that one can take is not that much because they must stay in the same rhythm as the rest of the group. Estigarribia added that the rhythm that one of the mother links of *fraseo* is eighth note, quarter, and two sixteenths, is also directly linked to speech and demonstrated by repeating the phrase *Sin embargo, cuando hablo esta todo el*

*tiempo sucediendo*. This shows why the two sixteens are not usually played short or compressed.

Similarly, Gallo said that he observed the same difficulty in a different way, while for the piano, the usage of time, specifically in the rhythmic dimension, for the violin is also one of the main difficulties that newcomers to the tango suffer. The main difficulty is in the expressive dimension. The expressive dimension, which is directly linked to the *fraseo* and also detaching from what is on the page, is a concept that is difficult for most non-tango players. Gallo said that it is because of its close connection to how one would narrate/sing the lyrics in the specific porteño (Gallo describes it as an Italian speaking Spanish, which gives the unique inflexion) accent, which gives it this unique timing and change. He says that with his Argentine students, it is as easy as having them speak or sing the lyrics and copy their own timing with their playing (which could have unique pedagogical possibilities when it comes to connecting someone's playing to their own voice). He shared as an anecdote that when he tried to use this methodology with a Venezuelan student, it didn't work because the accent didn't match the tango aesthetic. Therefore, we can assume that, even with Spanish speakers, the accent they speak changes the inflexions and rhythm. It is important to highlight that even when narrating the words, one should consider the verse structure for the rubato. However, he did mention working closely with a Tango singer from Paraguay that "sounded like another Argentine *tanguera*," so it is safe to assume that tango is not elusive to all foreigners, but may take additional effort to find those idioms found in Tango. As a good exercise, Gallo suggests doing the first verse of the Tango Cancion "Volver."

*Yo adivino el parpadeo de las luces que a lo lejos  
Van marcando mi retorno  
Son las mismas que alumbraron con sus pálidos reflejos  
Hondas horas de dolor*

*I guess that the blinking of the lights from far away  
Start showing my return  
They are the same that shed light on their pale reflection  
Deep hours of pain*

# V O L V E R

TANGO CANCION

Letra de ALFREDO LE PERA

Música de CARLOS GARDEL

The musical score for 'Volver' is presented in two systems. The first system shows the vocal line (Canto) and the piano accompaniment (Piano) for the first two measures. The lyrics are 'Yo a-di-vi-no el par-pa-de-o de las lu-ces que a lo le-jos van mar-can-do mi re-'. The piano part begins with a piano (p) dynamic. The second system continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment for the next four measures. The lyrics are '- tor - no. Son las mis-mas que a-lum-braron co-sus pá-li-dos re-fle-jos hon-das ho-ras de do-'. The piano part continues with a piano (p) dynamic.

Figure 1

The rhythm within this tango is basically constant sixteenth notes, but through *fraseo*, the rhythm is to be altered to fit the dramatic narration of the lyrics. Gallo offered many examples of how the emphasis of the lyrics could possibly change, like stretching the last *lejos* or emphasizing the word *adivino* or *luces*, and this in turn changed everything around it in order for the narrative to make sense.

Gallo also claimed that in the case of adding ornaments (appoggiaturas, neighbor tones, grupettos) within the context of a solo, the main difference with classical music is

that these should not be just breezed through but instead “*nombrando cada nota*” (naming each note), making them equal to the other notes in the measure.

They both agreed that each instrument has particular idioms within the Tango context. For example, a bandoneon solo will not utilize the same mannerisms as a violin solo. Gallo shared that in the case of the violin, it slowly evolved, when soloing expressively, into a more sensual, it is not virtuosic nor agile, but instead seductive and expressive (regardless of the technical abilities of violinists) according to the style that predominates following the violinist Fernando Suárez Paz (violinist of Quinteto Nuevo Tango where he was summoned by Astor Piazzolla until it was disbanded in 1988). He did mention another violinist who stood out as another prominent, slightly older figure of violin tango playing like Enrique Mario Francini, who had a lot more virtuosic and agile style.

Estigarribia claimed that when it came to the Piano, there were 3 main figures he could think were representative of the Tango style and great for newcomers to tango listen to: Roberto Firpo, who was one of the first to include the piano in the traditional tango ensembles; Orlando Goñi, who invented the modern *marcato* in piano; lastly, one of the key figures was Horacio Salgan, who pushed for harmonic, rhythmic evolution and a new level of virtuosity found in the genre, who led his own orchestra and often played with “El polaco” Goyeneche. Estigarribia claims that often the piano takes on the role of the “driver” in the Ensemble, which is why even within the *fraseo* and virtuosic fast ornaments, the piano is expected to be predictable and easy to follow.

## **TANGO COMMON RHYTHMS, GROOVES AND YEITES**

The Tango's common rhythmic patterns and grooves have changed over the years. During its first years of existence, it was strongly influenced by the Cuban Habanera, the Milonga, and the Andalusian Tango, written in 2/4 with the typical 3+3+2 groove, which was slowed down enough to the present 4/4. This evolution gave rise to diverse playing styles and traditional *yeites*, which modern performers are expected to know. However, unlike genres like Baroque music—where performance conventions are exhaustively documented by composers—these rules were shared primarily through oral tradition, requiring musicians to acquire the style intuitively through performance rather than through rigorous analytical practice. For string players, the use of expressive slides is very present, and also starting a note a tad below the written pitch and rapidly sliding up is common. The main *yeite* that is often present, often in Piazzolla's music, is the bouncing ball or “La pelotita”, where repeated notes that are accelerated, often shown like quarters going into eighths and then sixteens it supposed to imitate the rhythm of dropping a ball from 1 meter and its acceleration speed. This yeite is incredibly organic and feels very easy to follow along in a tango ensemble context. Many “yeites” are percussive in nature, because, unlike other popular music from the Americas, there are no drums or percussion. This lack of percussion encouraged tango players to add it with the available instruments, often hitting the keys of the bandoneon, or the body of the cello. In other string instruments “yeites” include the “*tambor* (snare)”, “*lija* (sandpaper) or *chicharra* (Cicada)”, “whip”, “glissandos” and “whistle”. These are all mostly effects, some of them heavily percussive, while others just like a glissando is a tremolo with

moving the pitch up or down, depending on what is marked. The *tambor* is achieved by placing the left hand in between the strings and only the nail bed having contact over the lowest string possible but not pressing down in any specific pitch and a strongly pulled string. This allows for different rhythms to be played (imitating the sound of a small drum). To perform the *lija* or *chicharra*, the player executes rapid, short bow strokes with pressure immediately adjacent to the tailpiece, specifically targeting the silk wrapping of the strings. For the cellist, success depends on finding a critical balance of bow pressure that prevents the production of any inadvertent, sustained pitches. The *whip* consists of a rapidly ascending glissando executed with an accelerated bow speed. On the cello, it is critical to initiate the gesture from a relatively high position on the fingerboard; starting too low elongates the slide, thereby compromising the necessary velocity of the effect. The glissandos are a slide up in a fast way accompanied by tremolo, or sometime measured, and then a slow slide down, usually in fifth or sixth double stops. A bass-specific “yeite” is the Strapatta, where the bow is dropped fast in a *col legno* fashion to play 16ths or 32nds, and then the string is suddenly stopped with the left hand. While achievable on the cello, maintaining this *yeite* without producing unintended pitches presents a significant challenge due to the instrument's thinner string gauges and lighter bow weight

Multiple rhythmic cells are worth mentioning, like the *sincopa*, *marcato*, and

3+3+2



Figure 1 Sincopa example, courtesy of Pablo Estigarribia

The Sincopa is a resource mostly written for lower voices like bass, cello, and piano. Although there are some exceptions where the whole ensemble will do this rhythmic cell.

This figure is usually not written like in figure 1 with an accent on the lower pitch, and Pablo writes it with the accent on the bottom octave going up which is already an improvement, in the case of cello and bass, I would also add a tenuto, to represent that it is not meant to be a sharp accent but an accent created by speed of the bow as opposed to bow pressure.

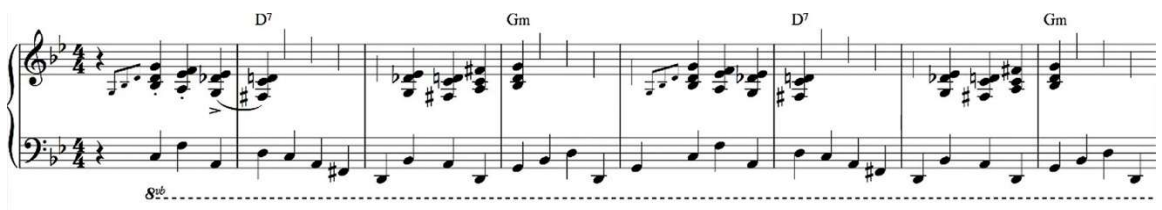


Figure 2 Marcato Example, courtesy of Pablo Estigarribia

The marcato groove is -simply put- four quarter notes, although sometimes written by arrangers with dots, it should resemble a bass player playing the quarter note slowly and then increasing the speed of the bow rapidly. It is important that the bow has to change angles, accompanied by fast movement of the bow. To start the sound, the tip

has to be pointing away from the player, and after the bow is executed, point towards the player instead. While it is not a long bow stroke, it is not short like a Shostakovich eighth note followed by a rest. This is significant, especially for non-bowed instruments. While sometimes it is a four-beat groove, in some *orquestas tipicas*, this turns into accenting 1 and 3, but still a held 4-beat sensation.



Figure 4: 3+3+2 Example, courtesy of Pablo Estigarribia

This is a groove coined by Piazzolla that is present in almost every one of his pieces, and which is the one derived from the genres of *candombe* and *milonga*. This is key to understanding that when the accents are seen on running eighth notes, like in the example (figure 4), those accents have to be very exaggerated in order to give the illusion of that 3+3+2 pattern rather than a 4+4.

### **THE TWO DIMENSIONS OF TANGO PLAYING: Expressive and Rhythmic**

Tango is often switches between two different ways of playing it, and it's easy to spot on sheet music. One can clearly see when the expectation to play rhythmic based on the way it is written, but often times it has to be taken to an extreme, when its eighth notes with dots, it's not supposed to be like a Mozart dot but rather as a Shostakovich or Stravinsky dot, very short and dry. In his book, Gallo claims that “ the sound sought in these articulations has more to do with percussion than with the melodic characteristic of

the instrument. I call this tone percussive articulation, which is common in both accented sounds and staccato”.

The effect to be achieved is a mixture of a definite sound and a dry, percussive click.” One can often see the same melody changing between these two ways of playing. The very best example that demonstrates this duality is the version of the *Orquesta Tipica* of Sarli, where the melody from the classic tango “*El choclo*” clearly shows these differences to the musician's ear.

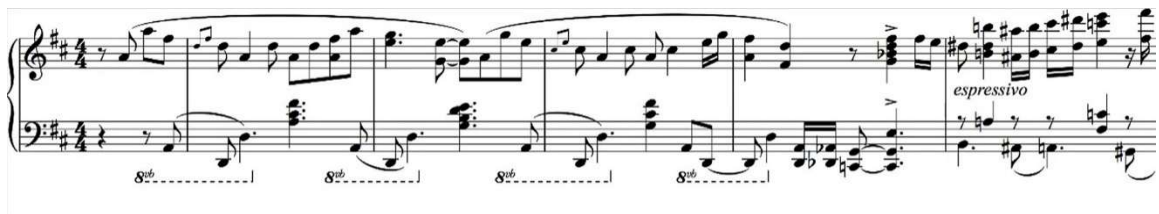


Figure 4 Example of how an expressive melody may be written.



Figure 5 Example of how a more rhythmic part may look.

These two examples provide distinct textual markers regarding the intended performance style. In Figure 4, the bass line presents a rhythmically augmented variation of the *síncopa*. Coupled with the *espressivo* indication and a closed *fraseo* phrasing structure, this passage invites the implementation of the *la pelotita* gesture; the reduced

accentuation and elongated syncopation within the bass line afford greater spatial and expressive freedom for the upper voice. Also, having the *espressivo* marking is a more direct indication. Contrastingly, Figure 5 employs staccato indications and explicit accents within the melody, immediately establishing a more pronounced rhythmic character. This is further supported by a condensed *síncopa* groove featuring heightened articulation and a *marcato* indication in measure 4, both of which dictate a stricter, more metrically regular delivery.

Gallo writes, “ the contrast between rhythmic and expressive dimensions is one of the defining characteristics of the tango genre. An expressive phrase will often appear immediately after a rhythmic phrase, and one part of the orchestra will often play expressively at the same time as another group of instruments is playing rhythmically.” The expressive side of Tango is often characterized by *fraseo*. Gallo defines this as “ We call the act of ' saying ' the melody by expressively modifying its rhythm *fraseo*. It is important to remember that a singable melody should not usually be played with the rhythm that is written: the rhythmic values on the page should be taken as guidelines. Ejemplos

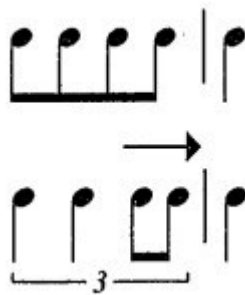


Figure 6 Example that Gallo uses in his book to explain *fraseo*



Figure 7 A longer demonstration of how frase would change what is written to tango

As Figure 7 showcases, it is not just a matter of phrasing, as one would call it in a classical music setting, but also taking the melody with the provided rhythms and “singing” the melody, but with more liberties. The tanguero then modifies the rhythms and turning it into speech patterns within the *porteño* accent (the accent from Buenos Aires). Furthermore, during our interview, Gallo showed me that sometimes it's even delaying the last beat where the accompaniment will continue playing the written rhythm in time, but the soloist will delay that resolution sometimes by an eighth note or more, to emphasize the dissonance between the harmonies or the contour of the melody.

We can divide the *fraseo* into the basic one, where the liberties are taken within the downbeat of each bar, and the *fraseo extendido*, which takes even more license beyond these limits to use rubatos. This is usually to extend the phrase past the bar line and be played together by the whole orchestra.

With the arrival of the Nuevo Tango in the mid-20th century, this style of phrasing or rubato started to find its way into tango, while aesthetically the soundworlds are vastly different. This idea, although not explicitly taught in Tango, is found.

*Sprechstimme*<sup>15</sup> is defined by Britannica as “a cross between speaking and singing in which the tone quality of speech is heightened and lowered in pitch along melodic contours indicated in the musical notation.” In the case of Tango, this is expanded further, especially when combining this idea with *fraseo*, the singer can take liberties with the rhythm and the pitches in order to emphasize the text or the music while the accompaniment remains strictly even.

This style that shares similarities with *Sprechstimme* in the realm of tango was coined by Roberto “El Polaco” Goyeneche, who worked closely with Piazzolla. If one listens to Piazzolla’s famous “Balada para un loco,” this style immediately stands out; it is this middle ground between narration and singing where the drama is enhanced and captures this smoky bar atmosphere that gives the nuevo tango aesthetic even a deeper emotional sensation. This parallel between Pierrot Lunaire and Balada para un loco is a fantastic example of the influences from Europe that were brought by Piazzolla to Argentina and to the tango. In order to further highlight this style, I will compare Por Una Cabeza in its original version by Tango legend Carlos Gardel, Esteban Riera, and Roberto Goyeneche.

This juxtaposition serves a dual analytical purpose: it underscores the radical manipulation of local rhythms and delineates the historical transformation of *fraseo* across successive generations of musicians. Ultimately, these examples reveal the extent to which the structural timeline remains fluid, dictated by the stylistic priorities of the individual performer.

---

<sup>15</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*, s.v. “Sprechstimme,” by the Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, last modified May 2, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Sprechstimme>.

1. Por Una Cabeza  
Tango Canción

Carlos Gardel (1887–1935) and  
Alfredo Le Pera (1900–1935)  
Arrangement by Ros Stephen

♩ = 108

Violin 1

Violin 2

*mf*

*mf*

Am

D

Figure 8 Illustrative of how Tango is often transcribed

16

The rhythm in this first example is basically all eighth notes and quarters, with some exceptions of some dotted quarters. If one were to take the rhythm literally, it would not sound like tango at all. Instead, it would sound square and somewhat rigid, which is not the case in this song. To demonstrate my point, I will show 3 representative, approximate ways that Tango players will often sing this tune.

The first one is the most famous one by far, Carlos Gardel performing it in his anniversary anthology recording,

<sup>16</sup> Ros Stephen, *Argentinian Tango and Folk Tunes for Violin* (London: Schott Music, 2011).



Figure 9 Carlos Gardel *Por una cabeza* with fraseo

17

Here we can clearly see the significant change in rhythm that occurs when a Tango player would perform song and how it morphs. It is evident that a lot of the approximations Gallo uses in his book are present and also combined with either faster or slower words; this, in turn, also shows the liberties one could potentially take, partly to mimic speaking but also to emphasize different words. The next example is another titanic figure of the Tango who is known for his singing style being less sung and more spoken, especially towards the latter half of his career. Roberto “El Polaco” Goyeneche started his tango career later than Gardel, roughly 20 years later, and in the Golden Era of Tango. The recording used as an example is from 1960, already close to the time of Nuevo Tango, so the aesthetic and liberties changed ever so slightly.



When comparing these two versions major changes are evident in the rhythm in general but also where some notes land in different beats altogether, with big breaths being taken in between verses, highlighting the structure of the verse itself and Goyeneche’s iconic style where he is more of a narrator than a singer, especially in the latter half of his career where he coined his own style, this is easy to notice in “Balada

---

<sup>17</sup> Transcribed by Author

para un Loco” where he performs Piazzolla’s music and the text of Uruguayan poet Horacio Ferrer. This is a time when the aesthetic evolved from the usual Tango topics of romance, happiness, nostalgia, and sadness to Fantastic Realism, a very significant literary current in the 20th century, mainly through figures like Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar.

Lastly, the next example is by Esteban Riera, a currently active Tango singer. Gallo mentioned in the interview that Tango is a genre that is constantly looking back and forward at the same time. This is a little bit evident in Riera’s performance since it is still free in a different way than the others, but his version has many similarities to that of Gardel more than Goyeneche.

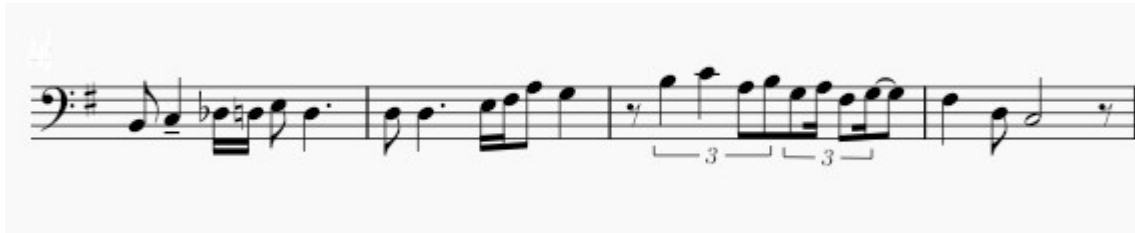


Figure 10 Modern version of *Por una cabeza*

As we can see in the examples, the rhythm can be divided by syllables in the text. Gardel chooses to emphasize the word *cabeza* and its first syllable; Goyeneche emphasizes the last syllable of *cabeza*, and the rhythm is completely changed. Contrastingly, we see Riera uses his impetus to highlight the word " *una* " instead of *cabeza*.

After seeing these examples, I thought it would be interesting for the reader to see the limitations in the sheet music itself. When seeing a score of *Por Una Cabeza*, the

difference found between all of these versions and the sheet music is shocking and very evident. This characteristic represents a primary obstacle for classical musicians or outsiders entering the genre; the execution of *fraseo* is inextricably linked to the linguistic cadences of the *porteño* accent, as well as the dramatic emphasis dictated by the performer's individual aesthetic or interpretation of the text. Further analysis of this first phrase shows even more discrepancies in rhythm and accents or emphasis. This is partly the beauty of Tango, it is very personal, and this in turn makes it more emotional, evidently to the listener. Also, depending on the instrument, the idioms vary depending on the role. For example, according to the interview conducted by the author of Pablo Estigarribia, the piano has to be the most predictable of all instruments since it's often the natural leader of the ensemble. When finding rubatos and phrasing, it has to be very obvious to the rest of the ensemble exactly where to enter.

Even further, sometimes in tango it is evident to see when there is a solo, and in this context it depends on the soloist and their style, but it can go as broadly as utilizing the written music as a cantus firmus, adding ornaments and fraseando, which alters the rhythm significantly and enhances the performance. To illustrate this, we will use the very famous and still often played in its many configurations, Piazzolla's Oblivion. We will then proceed to juxtapose the recording of the French artist, Gautier Capucon, and showcase these differences found in the main solo and how it goes from sounding what tangueros call “Square” to a fully tango styled appropriate performance, and provide a comparative analysis measure by measure. Within this analysis, it will be plain to see

what kind of liberties Piazzolla takes and some ideas for idioms he uses from the common tango language.

When we listen to Capuçons and Bertholet's version, who are accomplished and virtuosic cellists and violinists, they play what is literally on the page. While classical performers often keep Piazzolla's music intact, this is a lost opportunity to express and ornament the piece, making it more compelling and less rigid, while allowing for an expressive freedom outside the constraints of traditional classical music.

As an example, I will be utilizing Bragato's version of this piece for Piano trio. Here, we can clearly read that the rhythm is exactly what Capuçon and Bertholet play. Bragato was a cellist and arranger very close to Piazzolla. He is one of the most prominent figures who arranged Piazzolla's music to classical formations, string quartets, piano trios, cello quartets, etc. Even so, a lot of his music has not been published, and the only thing that is circulating is manuscripts that his family started sharing with a trusted few. In contrast, when we see the two excerpts from Piazzolla's solo, it is vastly different; he enhances his performance with expressive rubato, added turns, subtracting turns, arriving late to some downbeats or early to others. It is also important to highlight that the accompaniment behind him with the milonga rhythm is flexible but always on time on the downbeats, further adding to Estigarribia's claim that the rubato must be "out of time but in time at the same time." In the case of this Bragato arrangement, it starts by establishing a slow milonga rhythm ( 3+3+2) basically in the entire instrumentation, and the melody then starts in measure 9 in the cello. The melody has a straightforward rhythm

integrity as written by Jose Bragato, whole notes, sixteenths, eighths, and dotted quarters. However, a quick visual comparison between the transcribed music and what Bragato wrote, we notice not only different rhythms but also different numbers of pitches. It is also clear that it is not consistent even in Piazzolla's playing himself, the second time he plays the same melody, there are also discrepancies ( Figures 13 and 14)

# OBLIVION

ARR.: JOSÉ BRAGATO

ASTOR PIAZZOLLA

*Milonga lenta* (♩ = 92 - 96)

VI

Vc

Pno

*p*

*pp*

*mp*

*pp*

*pp*

*mf* *espr.*

*mp*

5

9

The image shows a page of a musical score for 'The Swan' by Camille Saint-Saëns. The score is written for a piano and a vocal soloist. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats), and the time signature is 3/4. The score is divided into measures, with measure numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, and 64 indicated. The piano part is written for a grand piano, and the vocal part is for a soprano. The score includes a piano introduction, a vocal entrance, and a piano solo. The piano part features a melodic line in the right hand and a supporting bass line in the left hand. The vocal part features a melodic line in the soprano range. The score is written in a standard musical notation style, with notes, rests, and other musical symbols. The page is numbered 1 at the top left.



Figure 13 Piazzolla's solo in bandoneon



Figure 14 Piazzolla's Second solo the second time in the same session

Just by looking at the figures, a lot of changes in the rhythm are evident, as well as the ornament, which in tango is played as real notes. Gallo said, “Every note is named,” even the ornaments turn into real notes as opposed to just something to breeze through. It is interesting to see how the same performer in the same performance deviates from what is on the page and what he has done the first time around. Most experienced tango players won’t write things into their sheet music, and instead add the ornaments spontaneously.

# SIDE BY SIDE COMPARISON

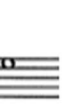
| Oblivion versions |                                                                                    |                                                                                    |                                                                                    |                                                                                    |                                                                                      |                                                                                      |                                                                                      |                                                                                      |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Measure           | MM 1                                                                               | MM 2                                                                               | MM 3                                                                               | MM 4                                                                               | MM 5                                                                                 | MM 6                                                                                 | MM 7                                                                                 | MM 8                                                                                 |
| Bragato Trio      |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Piazzolla 1       |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Piazzolla 2       |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Figure 15: Side-by-side comparison of Oblivion's versions.

**El Choclo**  
Argentinian Tango  
Angel Gregorio Villoldo  
Arr. A.L. Johnsen

$\text{♩} = 140$

Figure 15

This sheet music of “El Choclo” offers a unique insight into why sometimes people may not perform this tango in a proper stylistic way. It has been arranged by someone who is not tango-trained. The habanera rhythm is still there, although it is in the accompaniment, which has not been used en masse in Argentine tango since the 1910s. According to Gallo, he claims that it morphed into its own groove within Tango. A tango-trained person would alternate between the marcato pattern and the 3+3+2, which are more modern accompaniments. Everything in the melody is written at the same length, with eighth notes. This writer doesn’t add the word *Fraseado*, which a person less experienced with tango may interpret as literal.

A *tanguero* would likely alter the rhythms found in the eighth notes, and since it is not specified to alternate between the expressive dimension and the rhythmic, he will do so at his will; this, when playing with a bigger ensemble, will create a lot of problems. If one were to notate it closer to the equivalence Gallo shows in his book to us it would be closer. While the eighth notes in measure 30, a *tanguero* would possibly interpret it as a rhythmic phrase (staccato and dry), in the context of this particular tango; this is not correct. This showcases one of the probabilities of why it may be confusing for a musician who has just taken up an interest in Tango to find themselves with sheet music that is lacking information.

## **CONCLUSION**

Argentine tango is a challenge to start studying and performing, especially as a foreigner. However, it can be extremely rewarding and freeing to discover this new “accent” to play in the language musicians already know (their instrument). Gallo said that all he needs to do when taking on new students is teaching them the Argentine accent in music, since they are already proficient in their instruments, they do not need to be taught how to speak. There has been an increase of Tango performance literature in the past few years, and while still more is needed, it is my hope that this document helps bridge the gap even further. The idea behind this document was to provide a starting point for someone deeply interested in tango, sharing some of its techniques and tackling the toughest challenges for a musician looking to embark on their tango journey. It is also my belief that every musician could benefit from learning some of the tango concepts, even if they don’t decide to fully submerge in the tango world. This document also

sought to highlight the main problems of why Argentine Tango music practices have not been widely presented to the public, especially when often all that is presented is lacking in information or inadequate to instruct a musician who has just started tango. I found it interesting to highlight some parallels with popular music from around the world but also with classical academic music. Distilling some of the Tango practices is a titanic task, because of its lack of standardization but with such scarcity of materials, this document will become an asset.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Baim, Jo. *Tango : Creation of a Cultural Icon*. Indiana University Press, 2007.  
<http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip075/2006039032.html>.
- Berthollet, Camille, and Gautier Capuçon. "*Oblivion*." Performed by Camille Berthollet, Gautier Capuçon, Orchestre d'Auvergne, and Roberto Forés Veses. From *Camille - Prodiges*. Warner Classics, 2015, streaming audio, Spotify.
- Britannica Editors. "Sprechstimme." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, May 2, 2016.  
<https://www.britannica.com/art/Sprechstimme>.
- Estigarribia, Pablo. "*Tango Tips and Tricks - 1# How to play Tango?*" YouTube video, 5:30. September 12, 2018. <https://youtu.be/eKC2iJ1tEdQ>.
- Estigarribia, Pablo. "*Tango Tips and Tricks - 2# Tango Rhythmic Patterns*." YouTube video, 7:53. September 18, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hp-zU7nIiJ4>.
- Estigarribia, Pablo. "*Tango Tips and Tricks - 3# How to play Piazzolla?*" YouTube video, 5:30. September 25, 2018. <https://youtu.be/bgyOcvq7zhQ>.
- Estigarribia, Pablo. "*Tango Tips and Tricks - 4# Orchestra Styles*." YouTube video, 6:55. October 2, 2018. <https://youtu.be/ut4IgutHbyA>.
- Pablo Estigarribia (Tango Pianist, Latin Grammy Award Winner), interviewed by author, Buenos Aires, Argentina, November 15, 2025.
- Estigarribia, Pablo. *Tangos de Concierto: Concert Hall Tango*. Buenos Aires: Published by author, 2017.
- Gallo, Ramiro. *El Violín en el Tango / The Violin in Tango: Edición bilingüe* (Español / Inglés). Buenos Aires: Tango Sin Fin Ediciones, 2017.
- Ramiro Gallo (Tango Violinist, Latin Grammy Award Nominee), interviewed by author, Buenos Aires, Argentina, November 25, 2025.
- Gardel, Carlos. "*Por una Cabeza*." *Antología 60 Aniversario*, BMG Ariola Argentina S.A, 1995. Streaming audio. Spotify.  
<https://open.spotify.com/track/2FpW9e5wQuq7TkbS3Z4lwv?si=9cf3a697690e4e6d>
- Gardel, Carlos. *Por Una Cabeza*. Lyrics by Alfredo Le Pera. Buenos Aires: Anonymous, 1935.

- Goertzen, Chris, and María Susana Azzi. "Globalization and the Tango." Yearbook for Traditional Music 31 (1999): 67–76.
- Goyeneche, Roberto. "Por una Cabeza (En Directo)." *Historia de Oro (En Directo)*. Discos Melopea, 1997. Streaming audio. Spotify.  
<https://open.spotify.com/track/2Q1COShNh1VoZC31hsM5FA?si=6fd152c552264373>.
- Granados, Ysomar. "A Pianist's Guide to the Argentine Tango." DmA diss., University of Miami, 2001. ProQuest (304702874).
- Link, Kacey, and Kristin Wendland. *Tracing Tangueros: Argentine Tango Instrumental Music*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Luker, Morgan James. "Tango Renovación: On the Uses of Music History in Post-Crisis Argentina." *Latin American Music Review / Revista de Música Latinoamericana* 28, no. 1 (2007): 68–93. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4499324>.
- Pavel, Gina-Mihaela. "Astor Piazzolla's Compositional and Interpretive Styling of His Tango Adiós Nonino across Four Decades of His Career – Insights into the Emergence of Nuevo Tango." *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 12, no. 1 (2025).
- Piazzolla, Astor. "Oblivion." Performed and written by Astor Piazzolla. From Piazzolla Tangos 4. Trova Industrias Musicales S.A., 2005, streaming audio, Spotify.
- Piazzolla, Astor, and Roberto Goyeneche. "Balada para un Loco." Written by Astor Piazzolla and Horacio Ferrer. From Astor Piazzolla / Roberto Goyeneche. RCA Records Label (BMG Ariola Argentina S.A.), 1969, streaming audio, Spotify.
- Piazzolla, Astor. *Oblivion*. Arranged by José Bragato. Score (Manuscript), n.d.
- Stephen, Ros. 2011. *Argentinian Tango and Folk Tunes for Violin*. Schott World Music.
- Strada, Jorge, and José Bragato. 2006. *José Bragato: recuerdos y relatos en diálogos*. Mar del Plata, Argentina: Ediciones Suárez.
- Strada, Jorge. *Historia orientativa del tango: 1880-1995*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Fundación Papelnonos, 1995.
- Vega, Carlos. *Estudios para los orígenes del tango argentino*. 2nd corrected ed. Edited by Coriún Aharonián. Buenos Aires: Universidad Católica Argentina, Instituto de Investigación Musicológica "Carlos Vega," 2016.