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Introduction

A brief presentation of the history of tango, and the composers studied in this dissertation

Today's tango is the result of the artistic work of several great 20th century musicians; however, very few of them have made explicit the musical influences and innovative concepts and ideas that are implicit in their music. Tango enjoys an ever-expanding practice and popularity, and is nowadays one of the most popular world music genres; and yet, there is little practical knowledge about its creation, or re-creation.⁶

Following its humble and marginalized origins⁷ in the late 19th century, from the 1940s onwards tango enjoyed its period of steadiest expansion. Building upon the simple tunes improvised or played by ear by performers who usually had no musical education or reading abilities, as from the 1940s a radical change occurred. The new interpreters had highly developed technical and musical skills, and many of them had a classical music background. According to Horacio Salas:

Since [the 1940s] it became frequent that musicians playing in *orquestas típicas*⁸ would also join symphonic orchestras, since their training allowed for that. Tango was no more something by intuitive people whose basis was limited, at best, to rudimentary knowledge gained in the modest music school in the neighborhood. Now it moved in a field in which progress could only come from [musical] studies and technical solidity.⁹

In fact, tango's development was possible thanks to musicians who – in addition to being greatly intuitive – had the interest to explore tango materials further. The main tango exponents in that period were performers, arrangers, composers, orchestrators and conductors all-in-one, and their contribution determined what are now the main features of instrumental tango music. New compositions and arrangements combined tango melodies with counterpoint, more compound accompaniments and harmonies, and were on the whole more intricate than the earlier tangos. As such, musicians were forced to write this new complex music down. Notation did not, however, lessen at all the freedom with which tango music was interpreted, and performative features were maintained through shared codes aimed at reproducing the aural domain in written versions that only partly could approximate their interpretation. Of course a key role was played by the tacit knowledge of these intuitive musicians.

⁶ I use the term re-creation (parallel to arrangement) because of the treatment of the musical materials, which allow for a full revision of the original ones as well as the addition of new ones by the arranger. The results are in many cases extremely rich and constitute nearly new compositions crafted from other creations.

⁷ Tango originated from an encounter of the music (classical, popular and folkloristic) of European immigrants and the *gaucho* – rural population, bringing along Indian and Spanish heritage – who moved to the River Plate, to the ports of Montevideo (Uruguay) and Buenos Aires (Argentina) in search of work. Together they played traditional tunes from their own lands, mixing melodies, harmonies and rhythms which all contributed to the birth of the musical language of tango.

⁸ See Glossary.

⁹ Salas, Horacio: *El tango*; Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Planeta SAIC, 2009, p. 152.

The *orquesta típica*¹⁰ (tango traditional orchestra) was indeed crucial in the development of this music. From the 1920s until the 1960s, but especially in the so-called *Época de oro* (Golden Age) of tango, the 1940s-1950s, a large number of orchestras were active in many cities in Argentina. The repertoires were enriched by a highly literary and musical quality, and there was an absolute convergence of popular taste and tango styles: singers and orchestras were the stars of the time, and tango was the most widespread music genre.

In addition, tango orchestras acted as ‘schools’ for young musicians starting out, and were the key spots where everything about the genre was passed on, always orally. In turn, the new generation of artists continued the process of establishing new orchestras that performed their own music. This was the origin of tango ‘styles’, the specific manners with which different artists dealt with tango materials. Thus, through sheer talent, effort and hard work, the main figures of the genre managed to develop a personal language building upon elements inherited from the tradition.

During the 1940s, among the ensembles and orchestras that contributed to the definitive expansion and consolidation of tango were the ones led by Osvaldo Pugliese (1905-1995) and Horacio Salgán (1916). Both developed new techniques for the piano, being their instrument, and approached composition and arranging in a new way, while still relying on the tradition. The piano became the backbone of tango ensembles and the instrument from which the arrangements could be conceived and conducted.

Unfortunately, around the 1960s, after a flourishing period, most tango orchestras had to end their activities due to political and economical problems in Argentina.¹¹ In addition, influenced by the new trends imposed by the United States, people were made to believe that their own musical heritage and expressions were old-fashioned. On the whole, there was a change of taste in the public both causing and caused by the genre’s dispersal. Record labels stopped producing tango to sell rock and roll music, which was also continuously played on the radios as the new, hip music, further marginalizing tango as a genre for old, backward people.¹² As Oscar Del Priore explains:

In the sixties, a gradual lack of interest for tango started to show. Young people ceased to listen to and dance to tango. The new generations turned to other rhythms, to other musical genres. This resulted in the increasing disappearance of *orquestas típicas*, which were no longer in demand as before, and work for artists of the genre started to wind down. Besides the closure of cabarets and cafés, radio stations started to dismiss the live sessions from their programming. Recording companies also started to produce more commercial and profitable artists and genres. Besides, the great conductors of the Old Guard started to disappear. Di Sarli died in 1960, Troilo in 1975, D’Arienzo in 1976. Rock and roll, which had burst in Buenos Aires first through Bill Haley and then through renowned Elvis

¹⁰ See Glossary.

¹¹ As a result of the ongoing financial crisis, cultural and social activities were drastically reduced. As tango venues could no longer afford having live music, they stopped their activities or were closed down.

¹² Sierra, Luis Adolfo, *Historia de la orquesta típica*; Buenos Aires: Ediciones Corregidor, 1985, p. 175.

Prestley, had replaced tango in parties and dance venues of young people. Tango was absent for this generation of youths born in the forties, fans of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones that changed the direction of the recording industry in Argentina. Moreover, new idols of the so-called commercial music started to be created, arising mainly out of TV program *El Club del Clan*, which eventually crushed the presence of *orquestas típicas* in Argentinian cultural life.¹³

According to Juan José Mosalini, “between the 1940s and the mid 1950s, there were nearly 700 active *orquestas típicas*; in the 1980s, only one or two were left.”¹⁴ Although the genre survived thanks to smaller ensembles, they were not able to mould as many young musicians as the traditional orchestras had done in the past. According to bandoneonist Daniel Binelli:

In the eighties, tango was secluded because throughout two generations there was virtually no teaching of bandoneon players, as in 1965 *El Club del Clan* had buried all possibilities of working in carnival celebrations, and the broadcasting of [North] American music was overwhelming.¹⁵

In this respect, pianist Atilio Stampone adds:

People think that as from the fifties tango styles changed, but what actually changed was the orchestral line-up, which became smaller because of economic constraints. [Before the fifties] Orchestras were made of fourteen people. It was another country; people did attend and watch shows!¹⁶

All this led to a generation gap between the old masters and the younger musicians, causing an information gap; due to tango being an oral tradition, written information was nowhere to be found. So, despite the key role certain artists had in the historical development of tango’s musical language, there is a noteworthy shortage of written information regarding their work and – excluding an educational book by Salgán¹⁷ – none of these artists has documented their production. In other words, none of them has made explicit the implicit knowledge revealed in their musical output.

The famous bandoneonist Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992) also began his professional activities by playing in a traditional tango orchestra (Aníbal Troilo’s), displaying early on an immense creativity in his arrangements and compositions, which he would later devote to his own ensembles.

Finally, Gustavo Beytelmann (1945) was one of the few musicians to continue and broaden the path initiated by his predecessors. He has proposed and opened up new and original possibilities for tango music as the result of his diverse musical experiences; however, due to the bulk of his work being produced in Europe, Argentina has been, until recently, deprived of his innovations.

¹³ Del Priore, Oscar: *Osvaldo Pugliese. Una vida en el tango*; Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada S.A., 2007, pp. 101-102.

¹⁴ Keselman, Julio; García Falcó Marta: *Osvaldo Pugliese*; Buenos Aires: author, Centro Cultural Osvaldo Pugliese, 2005, p. 202.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

¹⁷ Salgán, Horacio: *Curso de tango*; Buenos Aires: author, 2001.

In the following sub-chapter I will explain the fundamentals of tango's musical language in order to exemplify the innovations introduced by the four artists under research.