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Creating and re-creating tangos : artistic processes and innovations in music by Pugliese, Salgán, Piazzolla and Beytelmann

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4.5 *La bordona*

Music by Emilio Balcarce²⁸⁹, 1958.

Arrangement by Gustavo Beytelmann.

Recorded by the Mosalini-Beytelmann-Caratini trio on the album of the same title, for the record company Label Bleu, Paris, France, 1981.

Duration: 5'38''

La bordona is one of the most celebrated pieces in the history of tango. It is also one of the finest pieces ever written by Emilio Balcarce, a talented composer and arranger, who frequently worked for the most renowned orchestras of his era (led by Anibal Troilo, Alfredo Gobbi, Francini-Pontier, José Basso, Leopoldo Federico, and Osvaldo Pugliese, among others). Astor Piazzolla himself once confessed that the one tango he wished he would have composed was *La bordona*.²⁹⁰

The piece's title refers to the *bordonas*, the lowest strings of the guitar, used to play the slow and melancholic *milonga campera* rhythm. Originally, the latter consisted of a steady rhythmical-melodic base upon which sung verses were improvised; later, in instrumental music, these verses became phrased solos. Balcarce's originality is shown by both his transformation of this rhythmical base into the main theme of the piece and his leaving that theme in its original register, i.e. in the bass line (the '*bordona*').

The analysis of Beytelmann's arrangement of this work for trio (bandoneon, piano, and double bass) is based on the photographed manuscript, its 1981 recording, Balcarce's original piano score²⁹¹ and its first recording in 1958 by Anibal Troilo's orchestra, for whom the piece was written²⁹².

This version of *La bordona* (along with all the versions of traditional tangos included on the album) presents the main features of the language that Beytelmann would later develop in his own compositions. Although the characteristic materials of the original piece are respected and presented in a clear, recognizable way, Beytelmann pushes the boundaries that were traditionally established by formal tango features. The piece utilizes the entire tessitura of each instrument (the bandoneon in its highest octave is a main trait) and demonstrates innovative features in rhythm, harmony and form. The instruments are used in a variety of textural layers and with diverse roles, clearly showing Beytelmann's treatment of the trio as an ensemble of soloists. In addition, he uses the three instruments as five distinct voices: double bass, bandoneon right hand, bandoneon left hand, piano right hand and piano left hand, combining them freely and using them in unusual and frequently varying registers. Lastly, the arrangement further emphasizes the irregularity and long duration of the original piece's phrases.

The form and general structure of the arrangement of *La bordona* is presented below.

²⁸⁹ Violinist, bandoneonist, conductor, arranger and composer (1918-2011).

²⁹⁰ Personal communication with bandoneonist Nicolás Lavallén, former member of Pugliese's orchestra.

²⁹¹ Released in 1958 by Editorial Julio Korn, as it appears in:

http://www.todotango.com/spanish/las_obras/partitura.aspx?id=1504. Visited February 21st, 2014.

²⁹² "Anibal Troilo for export", vol. 1, for the record company BMG, 1990.

Section	A			B		
Sub-sect.	a1	a2	a3	b1	b2	b3
Bar #'s	1-11	12-21	22-33	34-42	43-52	53-65
Qty. bars	11	10	12	9	10	13

Section	A'		B	coda
Sub-sect.	[a4]	a3'	<i>variación</i>	-
Bar #'s	66-71	72-91	92-114	115-118
Qty. bars	6	10	23	4

Figure 1: formal scheme of *La bordona*

Section A (from bar 1 with upbeat to bar 33), [00:00-01:44]

This first section presents a nearly identical melodic line compared to the original, but with significant variations in orchestration compared to the orchestral version. As we have seen in many other tango works, Beytelmann here uses the technique of keeping one musical parameter stable while modifying some of the others.

a1 (from bar 1 with upbeat to bar 11) [00:00-00:39]: in this first sub-section, Beytelmann uses the original E-minor theme literally, although here it is phrased and slower, with a tempo more linked to the *milonga campera* (as in the orchestral version) than to tango. From the very beginning, innovative features are introduced, which are used again later in the arrangement. As the piano plays the initial exposition of the theme, the bandoneon is in its highest octave, and there is a significant registral distance between the bandoneon and the piano (here more than five octaves). Whereas traditionally the melody would be presented in full by the piano, here the double bass presents this main textural layer, from its entrance in bar 8 (Fig. 2). The accompaniment consists of only the bandoneon playing a harmonic background²⁹³ of sustained, altered chords. In bars 8-10, the piano joins the harmonic background and the double bass plays the melodic line, without rhythmical marcato, different from the orchestral version in which there is a marcato in 4.

Figure 1: **a1** (bar 1 with upbeat-3), [00:00-00:14]

²⁹³ See Glossary.

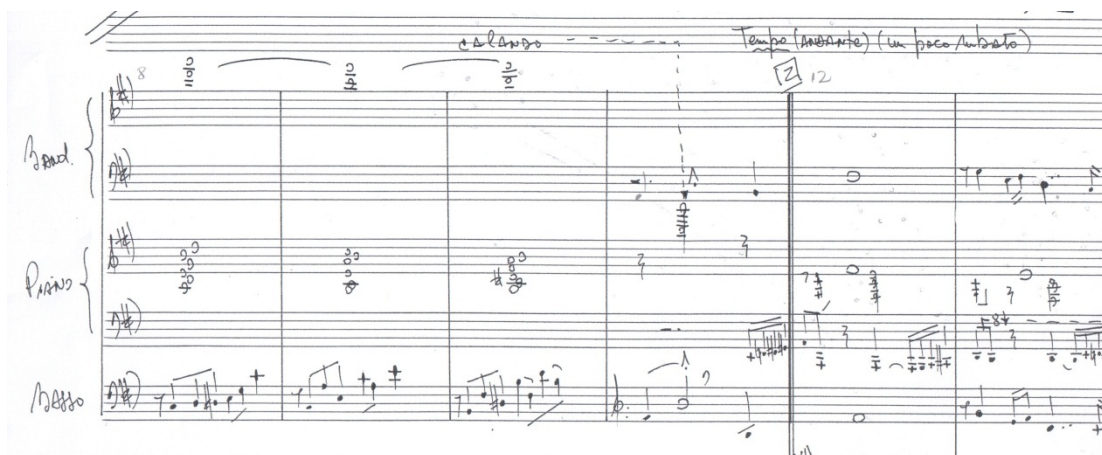


Figure 2: end of **a1**, beginning of **a2** (bars 8-13), [00:24-00:48]

a2 (from bar 12 with upbeat to bar 21) [00:39-01:13]: in this phrase the orchestration contrasts with Balcarce's version as the main layer is played by the rare combination of the bandoneon's left hand in unison with the double bass (Fig. 2) rather than by the piano. The phrase ends with the three instruments performing the theme in the low register, keeping the tempo of *milonga campera* (unlike the orchestral version).

a3 (from bar 22 with upbeat to bar 33) [01:13-01:43]: this phrase is related to the orchestration in Balcarce's version, but rhythmical marcato and instrumentation are altered. The piano and the double bass continue the bass line accompaniment from **a2**, which interweaves the phrases and grants them a sense of unity. The following scheme (Fig. 3) compares the main characteristics of **a3** in Balcarce-Troilo's and Beytelmann's versions (the bar numbers refer only to this phrase, not to the whole piece):

	bar	1	2	3	4	5	6
Troilo's version	Marcato	In 4		Syncopation		In 4	
	Melody	Soli strings					
Beytelmann's version	Marcato	Bordoneo			3-3-2, syncopes	in 4	In eighth notes
	Melody	Bandoneon solo					

	bar	7	8	9	10	11	12
Troilo's version	Marcato	Without stable marcato				Syncopation	In 2
	Melody	Tutti			Soli strings		
Beytelmann's version	Marcato	Without stable marcato				In 4	
	Melody	Bandoneon solo with piano y d.b. interferences					

Figure 3: comparative scheme of **a3** in both versions
[00:48-01:16 in Troilo; 01:12-01:44 in Beytelmann]

Beytelmann's arrangement of **a3** presents two outstanding features:

- From bar 23 onwards (Fig. 4), the piano, the left hand of the bandoneon and the double bass perform brief imitative passages (by means of rhythmical variation and compression) of the melodic line in the bandoneon's right hand, establishing a contrapuntal, polyphonic texture.

- In bar 32 (Fig. 5), the piano begins the **B** theme (starting at bar 34) a tritone higher, and, together with the steady base in 4 maintained until the beginning of **B**, interweaves both sections. This does not occur in the printed score or in Balcarce's version.



Figure 4: **a3** (bars 23-29, [01:16-01:33],
with indication of the above-mentioned features

Figure 5: end of **A**, beginning of **B** (bars 32-35), [01:39-01:50],
with indication of the above-mentioned features

Section **B** (from bar 34 to bar 42), [01:44-02:04]

This section respects the rhythmical language and the tempo of the recording by Troilo's orchestra. Thus, the typical contrast between sections is maintained, in this case being: **A**, melodic; **B**, rhythmical.

b1 (from bar 34 to bar 42) [01:44-02:04]: in this phrase the **B** theme is presented as a phrased piano solo in the high register (in the Salgán style) with an improvisatory character uncommon in traditional tango, and probably reminiscent of Beytelmann's jazz-related background (Fig. 5). This varies from the original version, as does the accompaniment, here performed by the double bass and the bandoneon. The double bass plays figures based on a similar sequence of pitches that rhythmically varies from bar to bar, while the bandoneon presents a harmonic progression that is more elaborate than that of the original version. In bar 41 (Fig. 6), the bandoneon doubles the main melody, making it thicker. In bar 42, a thematic passage in the left hand of the piano and the double bass leads to **b2**. As is typical in Beytelmann's works,

registral changes occur gradually, in this case through a descending passage in the piano's left hand in bar 41 (bringing the piano back to its usual register after its solo), which culminates in a unison passage with the double bass in bar 42. This helps to make the registral change between **b1** and **b2** smoother (Fig. 6).

The image shows a handwritten musical score for three instruments: Bnd. (Bandoneon), Pno. (Piano), and D.B. (Double Bass). The score is divided into two systems. The top system covers bars 41 to 43, with a bracket labeled 'end b1' and 'b2' starting at bar 43. The bottom system starts at bar 44. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Figure 6: end of **b1**, beginning of **b2** (bars 41-45), [01:56-02:10]

b2 (from bar 43 to bar 52) [02:04-02:38]: from this phrase onwards, the arrangement begins to differ dramatically from the original version. In the original version, the melodic line is distributed amongst different instruments (bandoneon alone, strings, bandoneons, and then strings plus bandoneons) all over a steady rhythmical base. In contrast, the melodic line in Beytelmann's arrangement is presented as a long, continuous bandoneon solo, which Beytelmann invigorates by using three different rhythmical marcatos consecutively: in double syncopation²⁹⁴ at bar 44, "in the Arolas style" at bar 45 and *bordoneo* at bar 46 (Figs. 6 and 7). In bar 47, the rhythmical base reinforces the melodic line (as in the orchestral version) and – by means of a *ritenuto* – leads to bar 48, in which the bandoneon alone completes the phrase, and is immediately imitated by the piano (in the added bar 49, Fig. 7). These sudden changes in the melodic line's instrumentation contrast with the previously continuous bandoneon solo. In the last part of the phrase another bar is added in order to reinforce the reduction in tempo. In this segment, two previously mentioned procedures can be observed (Fig. 8):

²⁹⁴ See Glossary.

- The gradual change between **b2** and **b3** allows for a smooth entrance of the solo bandoneon at bar 53 through a gradual reduction in instrumental density, tempo and dynamics.
- The elision of phrases: bar 52 is the last of **b2**, but also the first of the bandoneon solo (**b3**).

Figure 7: bars 46-49, [02:10-02:18]

Figure 8: end of **b2**, beginning of **b3** (bars 50-53), [02:18-02:48]

b3 (from bar 53 to bar 65) [02:39:03:21]: this sub-section presents a phrased bandoneon solo divided into two semi-phrases. The first semi-phrase (bars 53-59) corresponds to the ending of section **B** in the original version, now expanded and varied; the second one (bars 60-65) corresponds to the return of section **A** played by the double bass (also varied and now transposed a semitone higher, to F-minor) and the bandoneon starting a *variación*. There is again a gradual increase in instrumental density (the double bass joins in bar 61, the piano joins in bar 66), in tempo (accelerando towards the following phrase) and in registral density²⁹⁵ (the piano enters in the registral gap between the bandoneon and the double bass).

Section **A'** (from bar 72 to bar 91), [03:32-04:18]

[a4] (from bar 66 to bar 71) [03:21-03:32]: at this point in the original version Balcarce simply restated **a3** and ended the piece with the typical *variación* on section **B**. In Beytelmann's arrangement, however, he inserts new phrases from **A**, creating a new sub-section **[a4]**. Rather than a new phrase, these bars constitute a bridge reminiscent of the theme of **a1**, now varied and transposed to G-minor. The bandoneon continues the *variación*, tying together both phrases and leading to **a3'** (bar 72), while undergoing a steady increase in dynamics and tempo, as well as in rhythmical, registral and textural densities (Fig. 9).

Figure 9: end of **a4**, beginning of **a3'** (bars 66-74), [03:20-03:36]

²⁹⁵ See Glossary.

a3' (from bar 72 to bar 91) [03:32-04:18]: in this phrase the double bass alone (again in E-minor) continues with the passage of eighth-notes begun as a rhythmical base in bar 71, but now as the main textural layer (Fig. 9). In this way, the sudden textural contrast is softened and the previous phrase is tied together with this one. The eighth-notes are organized in asymmetrical groups through their articulations, therefore blurring the 4/4 metric structure. From bar 74 an interesting effect takes place, which we have already identified in works by Pugliese and Salgán: the background and the main melody are combined into a polyphonic texture. The double bass continues with its solo materials, while the piano and the bandoneon restate the theme of **a3** in a high register parallel passage in rhythmical augmentation (Fig. 10).

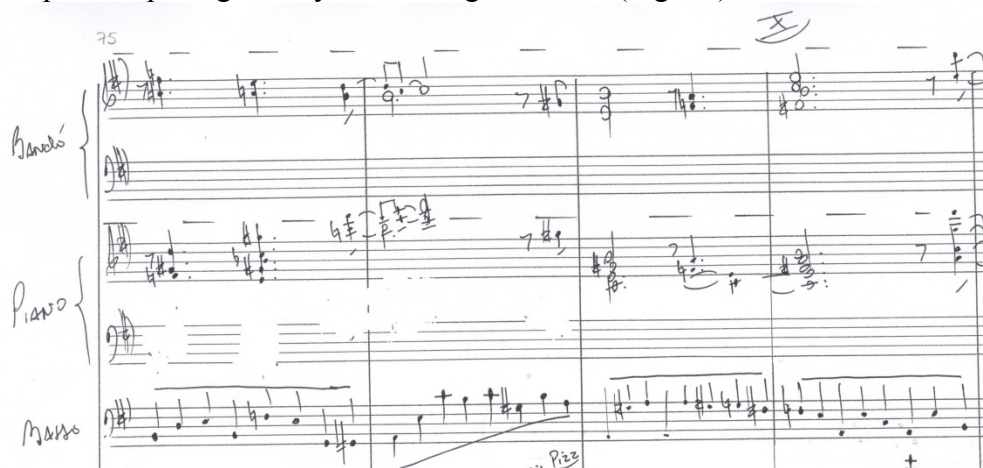


Figure 10: **a3'** (bars 75-78), [03:36-03:42]

This hierarchical ambiguity is gradually reduced until in bar 82 the second segment of **a3** is resumed in a tutti, exactly as in bar 28 (Fig. 11). In bar 86, the double bass resumes the accompanimental eighth-notes while the bandoneon extends the phrase until the return of **B**, and in doing so both instruments again interweave the two segments. As in bar 32, in bar 91 the piano anticipates the arrival of section **B'** (Fig. 12).

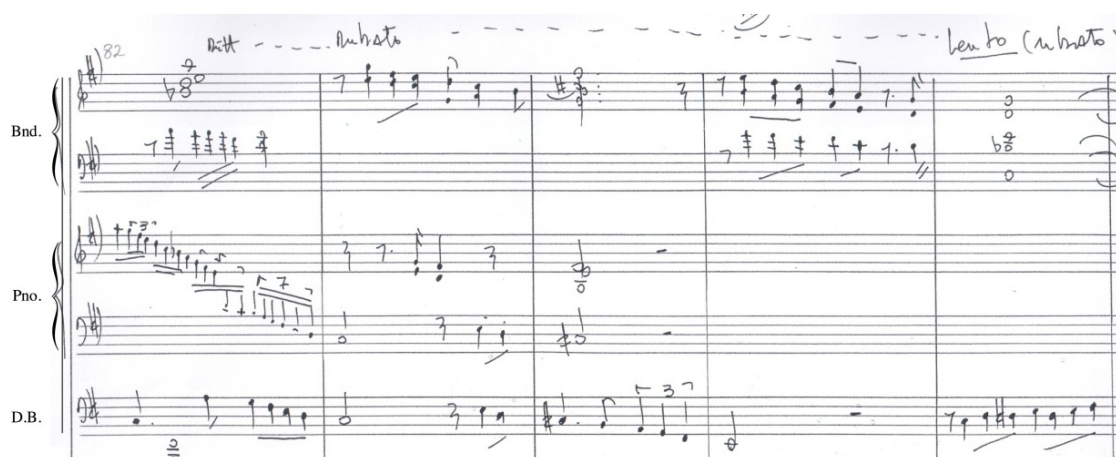


Figure 11: **a3** (bars 82-86 [03:50-04:06])



Figure 12: bars 91-93 [04:15-04:22]

B' (from bar 92 to bar 114), [04:18:-05:11]

After a tutti in bar 92 restating the beginning of the theme of section **B**, the bandoneon (as in Balcarce's version) begins a *variación*. This *variación* is longer than usual and extends the original twelve-bar segment to eighteen. The double bass plays marcato in 4, while the piano alternates accompanimental, syncopated chords with thematic passages, and – at moments – joins the *variación* in the bandoneon (Fig. 12). From bar 104, the accentual alignment of the three instruments with the meter demarcates a clear textural change. In the following bars 107-110, the *variación* is performed in a parallel tutti (Fig. 13). This differs strongly from a main characteristic of traditional tango, in which the double bass does not perform the *variación* but rather supports it with a steady marcato. Then comes a sequence of brief segments with a variety of textural densities that restrain the music's drive and lead to the coda (Fig. 14). The beginning of the **B** theme is literally restated in tutti (bar 113) and in the following bar a piano passage links to the coda.



Figure 13: **b1'**, (bars 106-108), [04:46-04:50]

Handwritten musical score for Figure 14, showing staves for Bnd., Pno., and D.B. The score is in 4/4 time and begins at bar 111. The tempo markings are *lento*, *crescendo*, and *piu lento*. The Bnd. staff starts with a high register chord (F#4, A4, C5) and a melodic line. The Pno. staff starts with a high register chord (F#4, A4, C5) and a melodic line. The D.B. staff starts with a low register chord (F#2, A2, C3) and a melodic line. The score ends at bar 114.

Figure 14: **b1'**, (bars 111-114), [04:55-05:11]

Coda (from bar 115 to bar 118), [05:11-05:38]: the piece ends with the *bordoneo* from the beginning of the arrangement in the piano and the double bass, and the same high register chord with which the bandoneon started the piece.