

Musica maestro!

Evolution of tango music from 1890 till 2005

Introduction

Looking back at the history of tango, one cannot help being surprised at the enormous changes it has undergone time and time again. Tango went from conventillo, barrio to brothels and via the cafetins to the big dancehalls of the forties and fifties. Tango as a dance evolved from milonga via tangomilonga to tango. The musical line-ups changed from trio's and quarteto's, via orquesta ttipicas to gran orquestas. And there is more that changed dramatically over the years, such as lyrics and the tempo music was played in. So let's focus on the musical evolution of tango.

In the beginning

The origins of tango are shrouded in mystery. Not much of it is known, because apart from some incidental records, the class where tango originated (mostly poor immigrants and gaucho's who came to Buenos Aires) didn't write much about their lives.

I do not know of any sound recordings from the prehistory of tango, although Edison already invented his phonograph around 1889.¹ The music label Victor started to make tango recordings in 1904. At first this happened abroad (England, France and the United States). The first recordings from Alfredo Gobbi senior date from this period. In December 1907 Victor sent a "traveling machine" to Argentina.² In 1910, 1912 and 1917 Victor's traveling machine revisited Buenos Aires and the Plata region. Several recordings were made of Angel Villoldo, Jose Razzano, Linda Thelma, Ignacio Corsini, Alonso & Minotti, Eduardo Arolas and Juan "Pacho" Maglio. The last one can be considered as the first superstar in tango. His popularity was immense and for some time gramophone records were called pacho's.

¹ Laird, 1999.

² Victor's traveling machine can be seen as mobile phonograph that traveled through the America's, a predecessor of the mobile recording studio we know today

In 1922 Victor founded its first permanent recording studio in Buenos Aires, where in 1926 the first electrical recordings was made: “La musa mistonga”, which was composed by Flores and Polito and sang by Rosita Quiroga.³

The first tango recording that I do know of dates back to 1909: “La bicicleta” from Angel Villoldo.⁴ What is striking in this version is the European sound, especially castanets and an Italian opera voice. Soon after this the distinguished European influencers did fade away. For example, Francisco Canaro recorded in 1916 his first version of “Vibraciones del alma”, which sounded like a tango we know and recognize as tango today.⁵ The transition from an outlandish Afro-European influenced sound to tango argentino took place in the period 1880/90 - 1910.

The first tangos we know are simpler in structure than later ones. Tango music has its origin from several musical sources. It is generally agreed upon that these sources are Cuban habanera (which functioned as a catalyzing force), Argentinean milonga and African candombe. There are, however, also several European musical influences in tango, such as polka, mazurka, flamenco, fandango and many more. It is evident that a music form in its embryonic phase still is filled with the elements of the musical sources it originated from. Therefore it only could be simply structured music. It took many years for those elements to mix in a melting pot to a phenomenon we now know and recognize as tango.

Furthermore, the first generation of tango musicians existed mostly out of amateurs. They were immigrants with little, if any at all, (musical) education. The children of the immigrants, the second generation, often got more education. This had its effects on the music of the twenties and thirties. In this period music becomes more sophisticated in both the

³ Benedetti, 2004. If you want to know more about Victor consult David Sarnoff's Internet library.

⁴ This version can be found on the bonus CD that belongs to Plisson, 2002.

⁵ This version can be found on El Bandoneon 129. For more examples from this period, I refer to the El Bandoneon series “Homenaje a la guardia vieja del tango”.

musical structuring and the mastering of the musical instruments. The best example of this sophistication of the tango music is Julio de Caro.

In the beginning the musical line-ups of tango formations were duos, trios and quarteto's. In the eve of the First World War, the orquestas típicas came into existence. They were the musical formations tango artists used till they were replaced by the gran orquesta in the late thirties and early forties.

The first tango formations were made up of regularly changing line-ups, who performed all over town. Formations were formed on a very free basis. Ferrer points out that in this period tango music was more improvisation than imitation.⁶ This resulted in both a cross cultural and a cross regional pollination. Musicians had no choice to be flexible, which naturally implied a lot of improvising as they went along. The interaction between musicians and dancers was evident.⁷⁸ In later times this two-sided interaction disappeared almost completely from tango music.

In the orquesta típicas from the twenties and thirties and certainly the gran orquestas of the forties and fifties, there simply was no room for improvisation.

The duos, trios and quarteto's used the following instruments: harp, violin, guitar and flute. Sometimes the harp was replaced by mandolin or accordion. Later they were replaced by guitar, which set the harmonic structure around which violinist and flutist 'improvised'. Musicians in this period didn't confine themselves to a particular kind of music; apart from tango and milonga other kinds of music were part of their repertoire. Think about rancheras, paso dobles, foxtrots, polkas, marchas and so on.⁹

⁶ Ferrer & Brave, 1989.

⁷ Turner, 2004.

⁸ Even in the various regions of Buenos Aires the styles of dancing were different. Denniston (2003) distinguishes three styles in the forties and fifties: a style for crowded dancefloors in the south-central part, with a lot of changing directions (ocho cortado), a more elegant style (salida) with more straight lines in dancing situated in the richer north and a third style with a lot of curves and arcs (ganchos and boeloes, which was danced in the south of Buenos Aires.

⁹ Especially Francisco Canaro and Enrique Rodríguez played other contemporary folkloristic music.

Bandoneon and piano came into tango at a later stadium. They replaced guitar and flute, because of their limited possibility to produce enough sound volume. The exact date of the entrance of bandoneon and piano into tango is not known. Opinions differ about this. Most likely the bandoneon made its appearance around 1890-1910, but this could well have been earlier. Birkenstock & Ruegg state that the bandoneon already came to Buenos Aires in 1870.¹⁰ A consequence of the integration of bandoneon into tango music was that, due to the technical difficulty of this instrument, the rhythms slowed down a bit.¹¹ The piano is believed to have made its entrance in tango around 1910.

There are several anecdotes about how the bandoneon, that was originally a German instrument designed for church music, found its way to Argentina, to make the instrumentation for tango complete.¹²

One of them tells about a German sailor, who was not able to pay his bar bill and was forced to pawn his bandoneon. A compadre, who was fascinated by the bandoneon although he wasn't quite sure what it was, bought the bandoneon from the barkeeper, who might have been relieved to get rid of it, not knowing what to do with any way. After buying the bandoneon he locked himself into his room and taught himself to play the bandoneon.¹³ Is it true or fictional? Who can tell?

However this autodidact aspect could explain that bandoneon playing in Argentina is so different from the European style.

In the beginning tango music was mainly an instrumental affair. There was some singing but not much. It usually was limited to the singing of refrains and the texts were rather simple and bawdy. At the end of the nineteenth century the payadores (travelling troubadours) started to cling more and more to their sung texts and the element of improvisation became less important. As a consequence a process of musical perfection set in.

¹⁰ Birkenstock & Ruegg, 1999. Also note that the year the bandoneon arrived in Buenos Aires probably preceded the year in which this instrument first was used in tango.

¹¹ Aslan, 1990.

¹² To what extent Heinrich Band can be called the inventor of the bandoneon is an issue still open for debate. Doktorski (1998) also names a few others, such as C.F. Uhlig, from Chemnitz and C. Zimmerman from Saxon.

¹³ Sebastian & Labrana, 1998.

Although Carlos Gardel witnessed in his youth the payadores, he was not a good improvisator and had to rely on compositions.¹⁴ He was aided in this by the second generation in the twenties, the children of the immigrants, who often had more musical education and paid more attention to texts. The tango poets Enrique Santos Discepolo and Pascal Contursi provided tango with more mature lyrics, which were immortalized by Carlos Gardel and others.

Tango between the World Wars

Just before the First World War the *orquesta tipica*s started to replace the trio's and quarteto's, which had musically dominated the first decades of tango. In the twenties and thirties this type of orchestra was standard in tango music.

In 1911 Vicente Greco formed the first *orquesta tipica criolla*, but the *criolla* tag was soon dropped. The *orquesta tipica* formation consisted of piano, guitar, two or more violins, bass or cello and of course a pair of bandoneons.

The twenties and thirties showed a waning popularity of tango. This can be attributed to two factors. First of all, tango got more competition from other music or cultural phenomena, such as the talkies (talking movies), other Latin American music genres and jazz.

Another factor is the sophistication of tango music. There evolved a new type of tango, a more musically refined sort of tango that was quite hard to dance to. Aside the traditionalist stream in tango (Canaro, Firpo and de Angelis), there arose an evolutionary stream in tango (de Caro, di Sarli and Troilo).¹⁵ This 'sophistication' in tango music may well have been caused by the prospering economical period Argentina experienced in the twenties, which favored a more elite cultural music scene.

The evolutionist school in tango, led by de Caro moved farther and farther away from the traditional dance music. Julio de Caro was a great musical innovator. He introduced in tango some new musical techniques, such as

¹⁴ Flores, 2005.

¹⁵ Collier, Cooper, Azzi & Martin, 1995.

the use of polyrhythm and contrapuntal (the use of more than one rhythm at the same time without a loss of harmony), rubato (playing slightly around the rhythm) and syncope (the suddenly and unexpectedly dropping of an accent).¹⁶

Tango reached an impasse like state. At one side there were the traditionalists and at the other side the evolutionists (also known as the decarean school of tango). This impasse was 'solved' by Juan d'Arienzo. In 1935 he formed an orchestra that became an overnight sensation. His music was to give a new impulse to music as well dance. By playing strong rhythmical arrangements of tangos dating from the early days of tango, he was able to lure the dancers back to the dancehalls again. Right from the start he used faster tempis than was customary. This was a successful move that inspired other orchestras also to speed it up.

If we take Francisco Canaro as an example, we see that his tangos in the twenties usually have rhythms that are about or just below 60 beats per minute (BPM). In the thirties it climbs to about 65 BPM and in the forties it is around 68 BPM.

La epoca de oro

The orquesta tipica was the dominant musical line up until the forties. In the eve of the Second World War a new type of tango orquesta appeared on stage: the gran orquesta. What big bands are to jazz, gran orquesta are to tango.

Just like big bands, gran orquestas consisted existed of musical sections, such as a section of violins, a section of bandoneons and so on. The gran orquestas owed their existence to the economical boom Argentina and the rest of the continent experienced. Argentina profited in a big way from the (looming) threat of war. The export of meat and grains to Great Britan made Argentina a very prosperous country. The saying 'as rich as an Argentine' dates from this period. The consequences for tango were enormous. Orquestas could employ more musicians, because there was so much money going around. Musical line-ups with more bandoneonists and

¹⁶ Ferrer & Brave, 1989 en Willemze, 2000.

violinists became a standard. Bigger formations automatically meant more musical possibilities. The music got more and more refined. Think about intertwining melodies. This development had already set in with Julio de Caro.

In the forties the tango cantando (sung tango) became more and more popular. Extremely well talented composers, arrangers and tango poets, aided the new generation of singers, such Roberto Goyeneche, Francisco Fiorentino and Alberto Podesta. The most famous tango poets from this era are Enrique Santos Discepolo, Homero Manzi, Catulo Castillo, Homero Exposito and Enrique Cadicamo. They transformed tango lyrics from the traditional archetypal themes of love and disappointment to more 'serious' subjects like life and philosophy.¹⁷

The average tempo of tango music slowed down a bit so that towards the end of the epoca de oro the tempo was a little slower than ten years before. A side effect of the economic prosperity in Argentina was that in the beginning of the forties the first real dance floors appeared. The "down to earth" milonguero style almost completely disappeared and was replaced by a more artistic way of dancing.

Intermezzo

Musically the epoca de oro may have shown the greatest musical variety ever in tango's history. Each orquesta had its own characteristic sound or 'color'. This color of an orchestra was unique and clearly discernable from other orchestras. What factors contributed to the color of an orchestra?

Aslan poses that, due to the lacking of a drum section, all the other instruments played a more or less important role in establishing the rhythmical structure. The basic four beat pattern of the tango (marcato) is the underlying theme in tango. Every tango orchestra had its own unique way of interpreting this basic pattern, which caused the different colors in tango music.¹⁸

¹⁷ Aslan, 1990.

¹⁸ Aslan, 1990.

Tango-nuevo

In the mid fifties the *epoca de oro* came to an end. After the tragic death of Eva Peron, Argentina met with both economic and political troubles. The thoughtlessly money spending political system lost its credit. In 1954 this regime was replaced by the military, which disliked anything Peron had been in favor of. Peron's propagation of nationalistic values (tango), made tango suspicious to them. And also the class tango originated in was suspect. The emergence of a worldwide youth culture (rock and roll and pop music) and idols like Elvis Presley, the Beatles and the Stones also played an important part in tango's downfall. The consequences for tango were dramatical. Many orchestras quit or trimmed down the number of musicians. Music lost a lot of its finesse. Tango orchestras lost their place in the spotlights to the emerging youth idols. Tango became more and more a marginal phenomenon.

In this vacuum there was opportunity to modernize tango, a phenomenon usually called tango-nuevo. Astor Piazzolla was the main innovating force of tango. He mixed elements of jazz (he grew up in New York) and classical music (he studied under tutelage of Nadia Boulanger) with tango.

When you compare Piazzolla's music from the early sixties with music dating from the *epoca de oro* (and even his own music from this period!), you cannot help wondering about what a revolutionary break he made with tango as it was. The contrast between the music, that was composed specially for dancing (forties and fifties) and the complex symphonic music to listen to that Piazzolla composed, is striking.¹⁹

Many people were disgusted with the new tango. Piazzolla was called names and threatened regularly and there even have been some fistfights with members of traditional orchestras.²⁰ It is only in the seventies that Piazzolla is generally accepted when he composed "Balada para un loco".

¹⁹ As Piazzolla said himself: "For me, the tango was always for the ear rather than the feet. ... I was taking the old tango away from them. The old tango, the one they loved was dying. And they hated me." ((Dotorski, 1998).

²⁰ Azzi & Collier, 2001.

He was also invited to play in the Teatro Colon, which is considered one of the greatest honors bestowed on a tango musician.

In the eighties tango experiences a worldwide revival. The dance show “Tango Argentino”, musically supported by Sexteto Mayor, made a very successful tour through Europe and the United States of America. Also the tango musicians in Paris, driven from their fatherland by the military junta, gave a new impulse to tango. The music of the young guard of tango (Mosalini, Cedron, etc.) is inspired by tango-nuevo as well as the music from the epoca de oro. They quite often use older compositions and rearrange them in a modern way and in doing so (in my opinion), it sounds more virtuoso but also less emotionally intense. The modernization of tango music caused the more or less ‘fixed’ tango line-up to disappear.

In modern tango orchestras there is a multitude of line-ups and also the most exotic instrumental combinations do occur. It seemed as if everything was possible and had to be tried at least once; anything goes as they used to say in jazz. Tango didn’t differ from other twentieth century’s dominant musical forms, such as blues, jazz rhythm and blues, rock and roll and pop music: tango also took part in the sixties and seventies in musical innovation, experiments and musical crossovers.

... and now for something completely different

The beginning of a new millennium, there is suddenly a completely new and unexpected ‘sound’ in tango music. Inspired by tango music (both nuevo and more traditional) and using all kinds of modern digital sound techniques (sampling and editing), neo tango surprises the tango scene with new and rhythmically energetic modern tango crossovers. In 2000 the Gotan Project released “La Revancha Del Tango”. Their success inspired a lot of other musicians. Within a few years there were dozens of tango fusion like bands active, such as Narcotango and Bajofondo Tango club.

Whether neo tango or tango fusion will be a permanent phenomenon in tango remains to be seen. However it does have a refreshing effect on tango and might function as an inspiration for future generations of tango musicians.

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June-Augustus 2005, Arnoud de Graaff

Update: 8-9-2005