

## El Bandoneón y el Tango

Amongst the family of accordions, there is a small variety known as the bandoneón. The bandoneón has become synonymous with the Tango of Argentina and Uruguay. Additionally, the bandoneón has been used to play in large, traditional orchestras and has also been used to play regional folk music.

The accordion is, “a term applied to a number of portable free-reed aerophones,”<sup>1</sup> one of which is known as the Chemnitz Concertina, deriving its name from the city in Germany where it was first created. The bandoneón has 38 keys for the high and medium registers and 33 for the low register. Originally created as a diatonic accordion in the 1840s, by the 1920s a chromatic version was made available – eventually eclipsing the diatonic version of the instrument. However, the diatonic bandoneón is still played in traditional folk settings by artists such as René Marino Rivero.

The difference between a diatonic and a chromatic accordion is simple – if the same note is played upon the opening and closing of the bellows the accordion is said to have ‘double-action’ and is known as chromatic; if a different set of notes are played upon the opening and closing of the bellows the accordion is said to have ‘single action’ and is known as diatonic.<sup>2</sup> This seemingly minor change has/had huge implications regarding the ease of use of the instrument, as now pitches could be sustained for longer periods, potentially affecting the types of music could be notated for the bandoneón.

One style of music which has become synonymous with the bandoneón is the Argentine and Uruguayan tango. The tango was developed in the *arrabales* and *orillas*<sup>3</sup> (poor slum areas)

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<sup>1</sup> Helmi Strahl Harrington and Gerhard Kubik. “Accordion.” *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/46180> (accessed December 11, 2008)

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Orillas* means outskirts in Spanish.

of Buenos Aires and Montevideo – these were often the areas of the seaports and far away from the *centro*.<sup>4</sup> A tango is an urban dance that was first danced by poor European immigrants to the Latin American port cities of Buenos Aires and Montevideo. By the 1850s the dance had spread throughout Latin America and by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, throughout the world.<sup>5</sup> Being a major port city and arrival-point for hundreds of thousands of immigrants, “a conscious effort was made by the Argentine elite to turn Buenos Aires into [a] showplace, with lavish private and public architecture, . . . the world’s largest opera house, and an underground railway.”<sup>6</sup> However, while the Argentine elite promoted all of these new luxuries of Buenos Aires, they rejected the “wildness and obvious sexuality of the dance and its association with the capital’s demi-monde and underworld.”<sup>7</sup>

Often danced in “*piringundines*, low-life venues where women could be hired as dancing partners, some of which functioned as barely-disguised brothels,”<sup>8</sup> the tango came from a fusion of different European and African dances where men sought to portray the vertical expression of their horizontal desires. The term ‘tango’ itself also has African roots and probably arrived in Latin America by way of the Portuguese slave trade. In addition to the name, the trade route brought European wares and cultural influences such as music and dance. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the waltz had been introduced to Latin America, followed by dances such as the *mazurka*, *polka*, *chotis* and the Spanish-Cuban *habanera*. These dances together played a part in the emergence of a local dance called the *milonga*,<sup>9</sup> -- widely viewed as the immediate parent to the tango.

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<sup>4</sup> Gerard Béhague. “Tango.” In *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/27473> (accessed December 11, 2008)

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Simon Collier. “The Popular Roots of the Argentine Tango.” In *History Workshop*, No. 34, Latin American History (Autumn 1992), pp. 92-100. *Oxford University Press*, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/4281984> (accessed December 12, 2008)

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 98

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 97

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 95

Eventually, a specific structure created and became known as the tango form. Structurally, the first tangos tended to have a tripartite form, “but after about 1915, the two-part form began to predominate. [Enrique] Delfino is considered the first composer to have established the standard form of tango: two parts of equal length (14-20 Bars), the second generally in the dominant . . . key.”<sup>10</sup>

Along with a standard form, came a standard ensemble. The first tango ensembles were composed of a violin, guitar and a flute, with the accordion often replacing the guitar. However, around 1900 the new trio included a piano, violin and bandoneón. This standardized ensemble came to be known as the ‘*orquesta típica criolla*’<sup>11</sup> and is credited to Vicente Greco, a famous composer and bandleader.<sup>12</sup> As time progressed, the ensemble grew to include up to four bandoneóns, a sizeable string section with violins, a cello, a double bass and a piano. By the 1930s, the tango had attained a higher status in Argentine culture. Eventually, by the 1940s, large orchestral arrangements, which included percussion and other instruments, were made by the child prodigy bandoneón player, Astor Piazzolla.

Piazzolla is best known for breaking away from the *orquesta típica* and including elements of “fugue, extreme chromaticism, dissonance, elements of jazz and, at times, expanded instrumentation.”<sup>13</sup> Initially, Piazzolla was met with resistance, as was true of the tango in general. However, Piazzolla eventually attained tremendous respect and in 1944 he split from his then band and created the *Orquesta del 46*, a vehicle for his own compositions, which performed at his own club, Jamaica. Eventually, Piazzolla would win a scholarship to study in Paris with Nadia Boulanger, who encouraged him to compose tangos. While in Paris, Piazzolla composed a

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<sup>10</sup> Béhague, p. 2

<sup>11</sup> (loosely translated to ‘the typical folk orchestra’)

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Cliff Eisen. “Piazzolla, Astor.” In *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/45192> (accessed December 11, 2008)

concerto for bandoneón, amongst other works. Piazzolla's style would eventually become known as 'nuevo tango.' While Piazzolla made the bandoneón synonymous with the tango, right across the River Plate, in Uruguay, the instrument was being used to play more traditional folk songs.

As many folk songs were never notated, but transmitted aurally, there is no way of knowing the origins of the folk music now played on the bandoneón. However one modern day bandoneón virtuoso, René Marino Rivero, has made the bandoneón synonymous with folk music.<sup>14</sup> A native of Tacuarembó, Uruguay, Rivero laments the fact that people generally associate the bandoneón only with Argentine tango and a low class urban environment in the booklet accompanying his CD "Pure Bandoneón: Dances of Uruguay." He therefore chooses to play 24 dances and songs that were popular in Tacuarembó<sup>15</sup> in the 1950s. Rivero uses what he calls "standard elements" of Uruguayan bandoneón throughout: "frequent use of minor and sharp keys, dissonances on accented beats, dynamic diversity, the use of pianissimo on important phrases, the avoidance of brilliant timbres and ostinati, the use of variations rather than identical repeats, a wide ambitus, and the building up and resolution of tensions by means of crescendo and decrescendo."<sup>16</sup> He additionally includes *milongas*, waltzes, foxtrots, polkas and other traditional Latin American dances – thus, demonstrating the wide range of styles which can be played on the bandoneón.

The bandoneón has as rich a history as it has sound. Itself an immigrant to the Americas, it is a reflection of the music it produces and the people who produce the music. From the rural countryside or the urban brothels near the ports, to Lincoln Center, the tango has come a long

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<sup>14</sup> Jane L. Florine. "Review: Bandoneón Pure: Dances of Uruguay by Rene Marino Rivero, et. al." In *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 41, No. 2, Special Issue: Issues in Ethnomusicology (Spring – Summer 1997). *University of Illinois Press on behalf of Society for Ethnomusicology*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/852619> (accessed December 11, 2008)

<sup>15</sup> Tacuarembó is a largely agrarian rural province far north of Montevideo. It is also the home of legendary tango singer, Carlos Gardel.

<sup>16</sup> Florine, p. 302.

way – it too being influenced by the blending of cultures along the way. All around, the bandoneón has proven itself to be an instrument capable of tremendous versatility and requiring tremendous virtuosity.