

Performing Tango on the Double Bass:
A Performance guide to Andrés Martín's *Tres Tangos para Duo de Contrabajos*

by

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ABSTRACT

Tres Tangos para Duo de Contrabajos (Three Tangos for Double Bass Duet) is a three-movement set written by Andrés Martín and commissioned by Darren Cueva specifically for this document and accompanying performance project. This piece blends tango with Western art music in a style often referred to as “nuevo tango” (new tango) which was popularized by Astor Piazzolla. This research paper will serve as a performance aid for those wishing to present tango idioms on the double bass in addition to a more detailed guide to performing *Tres Tangos* by Martín.

To give context to performers, this survey begins with a brief history of the tango and the life and stylistic developments of Astor Piazzolla. Various music and dance styles that contributed to early tango include, *milonga*, *habanera*, and *tango andalúz*. The resulting tango was popularized as a music and dance style in the early twentieth century. Astor Piazzolla brought the tango to the concert hall after studying composition with acclaimed professor Nadia Boulanger. His new tango style merged traditional tango, classical composition, and jazz music, which he was exposed to after his family moved from Argentina to New York.

Tres Tangos was modeled after the style of Piazzolla. Characteristic articulation and improvised techniques are a fundamental aspect of the tango sound; a successful performance will depend on the musician’s ability to create these sounds. A detailed description of the most common elements is provided as well as suggestions for creating them on the double bass. Finally, I have compiled a specific performance guide for *Tres Tangos*. This guide includes rhythmic, articulation, fingering, and notational considerations, to assist in the performance of this piece.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Tres Tangos para Duo de Contrabajos (Three Tangos for Double Bass Duet) is a three-movement work by Andrés Martín commissioned by Darren Cueva specifically for the present research project. This work was premiered by Darren Cueva and Andrés Martín on March 31, 2018, at Arizona State University. It was important to me that this piece be collaborative and written specifically for the double bass. During the course of earning a college degree in classical music performance, it is normally required for students to participate in the performance of chamber music. Bass players, however, are often excluded from these opportunities. The reality is that most chamber works were not composed with a double bass in the instrumentation, and the ones that do include bass are infrequently programmed. However, I firmly believe that the skills developed while collaborating in small ensembles are invaluable to becoming a successful performer. While performing with pianists in recitals is a good experience, working with similar instrument types, such as strings, winds, and other mixed ensembles, requires much more careful attention to blend tone colors, articulations, and a variety of other musical elements.

Since bass players have limited opportunities to participate in standard chamber repertoire, there has been a surge of interest in chamber music for bass ensembles beginning in the twentieth century. This piece adds to that repertoire and will hopefully become a staple of collaborative bass music for future generations. With this piece, Martín has created an opportunity for bassists to play together and learn these important musical skills. The piece can be performed as a three-movement set, but each movement could also be performed as a stand-alone piece, easily added to a chamber music concert or double bass recital. The work may seem challenging and will indeed require a

significant amount of work for most bassists. The following performance guide is intended to help musicians navigate the more complicated aspects of this music. Before technical aspects required for a successful performance are addressed, it is first important to know about the evolution and development of the tango. This understanding will contextualize the history of the style and will contribute to a performance, which might otherwise sound lacking.

The following survey was designed to help double bass players understand tango music and effectively perform in the tango style. The document begins with a brief background of tango music to help performers contextualize the tradition. This is followed by historical information about Astor Piazzolla and the new tango style that he pioneered. Following these historical sections, there is a chapter on common tango techniques with performance suggestions specific to double bass players. The final sections include program notes and a performance guide for the commissioned work, *Tres Tangos para Duo de Contrabajos*.

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND

A precise history of the tango is unknown. Even a preliminary survey of the available literature yields inexact dates of origin and a variety of music and dance styles that could have contributed to its creation. I-Ching Tsai cites four dance styles that contributed to the tango: Candombe, Milonga, Habanera, and Tango Andalúz.¹

Candombe: (not to be confused with the Brazilian *Camdomblé*) A genre that came to Argentina from West Africa via Uruguay some time near the turn of the nineteenth century. This style consisted purely of rhythmic sounds with no melodic component. During the Carnival season² it was common for comparsas, groups that would parade through the streets, to gather and represent various social identities.³ One such group, the Negro Argentinos, followed others in opting for an American identity over an African one; however, this group saw African instruments as too important to simply abandon.⁴ The result was a combination of drums and rhythms of candombe to be combined with melodies, harmonies, and instruments from Europe. The combination resulted in a new kind of music they called “tango.”⁵ Journalist Vicente Rossi described

¹ I-Ching Tsai, “The Evolution of the Tango and Astor Piazzolla’s Tango Nuevo” (DMA diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2005): 2-6.

² Carnival is a Christian festive season especially prominent in Western Christian traditions. The season takes place before Lent (a period of fasting beginning forty-six days before Easter) and in many Latin American countries the festivities include parades and public celebrations.

³ George Reid Andrews, “Remembering Africa: *Comparsas* and *Candombe*, 1870-1950,” in *Blackness in the White Nation: A History of Afro-Uruguay* (Chappel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010): 51.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

the similarities of candombe and early tango, even going as far as to call early tango of the 1860s “Creolized candombe.”⁶

Milonga: A vocal genre accompanied by guitar in 2/4 time, used by the *gauchos*, or native cowboys. In Argentina, milonga has since grown into a tradition very much associated with dance and with tango. So entangled are the milonga and tango traditions in Argentina that Ana Cara describes tango as being “closely related to (and sometimes synonymous with) the milonga cultural complex . . . The term ‘milonga’ refers not only to tango dance halls in Buenos Aires but also to the tango dance venues that have proliferated worldwide with increased popularity of tango dancing.”⁷ Cara includes the following quote from Alfredito, a famous milonguero as further evidence: “El tango no se entiende sin la milonga” (tango can’t be understood without the milonga).⁸

Habanera: “A Cuban style that grew out of a stylization of the Spanish contradanza, which was itself a stylization of the English *Country Dance*.”⁹ Behagué argues that the *habanera* rhythmic formula is the rhythmic base for most Latin dance music including the Argentine milonga and tango.¹⁰

Tango Andalúz: A popular danceable song type from late-eighteenth-century Spain that included rhythmic elements from African traditions. Slaves accompanying the

⁶ Vicente Rossi quoted in George Reid Andrews *Blackness in the White Nation*, 52.

⁷ Ana C Cara, “Entangled Tangos: Passionate Displays, Intimate Dialogues,” in *Journal of American Folklore* 122/486 (Fall 2009): 440.

⁸ María Susanna Azzì, *Antropología del Tango: Los Protagonistas* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Olavarría, 1991): 19; found in Ana C Cara, “Entangled Tangos: Passionate Displays, Intimate Dialogues,” in *Journal of American Folklore* 122/486 (Fall 2009): 440.

⁹ I-Ching Tsai, “The Evolution of the Tango,” 2-6.

¹⁰ Gerard Behagué, “Latin American Folk Music,” in *Folk and Traditional Music of the Western Continents*, ed. Valery Woodring Goertzen (Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990): 219-220.

Moors during occupation of the Iberian Peninsula in the Middle Ages brought rhythmic aspects of African music that was then infused with the music of the region. Behagué states that the rhythmic figure often referred to as the *habanera* was also the “rhythmic foundation of the tango andalúz and had been present in Mexican dances of the colonial period.”¹¹ This would seem to support the idea that tango andalúz is the musical ancestor of all of the Latin American dances mentioned above including the Argentine tango.

Musicologists, however, do not agree upon this list of dance styles that contributed to tango. Carlos Vega states that the tango andalúz is the “principal progenitor of the Tango,” while Vicente Rossi argues that tango is solely the descendent of *Habanera*.¹² Thompson reinforces this argument with the following statement: “When the Afro-Cuban habanera . . . arrived in Buenos Aires after 1850, it triggered a sequence that led to three dances: milonga, cayengue, and tango.”¹³ This passage singles out habanera as the main impetus for the creation of tango and also eliminates the possibility of milonga as an ancestor of tango. This is reinforced by Thompson who goes on to state that the milonga is a tradition all its own and “not a mere precursor to tango.”¹⁴ Other researchers believe that this list is not comprehensive. In *Tango!: The Dance, the Song, the Story*, Simon Collier argues that several European genres including Waltz, Polka, Mazurka, and Schottische added to the development of the tango.¹⁵ Richard

¹¹ Gerard Behagué, *Music in Latin America: An Introduction* (Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1979): 100.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Robert Farris Thompson, *Tango: The Art History of Love* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005): 111.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁵ Simon Collier and Ken Hass, *Tango!: The Dance, the Song, the Story* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995): 40.

Miller further expands the list to include *tresillo*, a syncopated Afro-Atlantic rhythmic pattern.¹⁶ Miller even goes as far as to claim that tango, which is commonly believed to be an Argentine style, actually developed simultaneously in Brazil. Sole credit was later given to Argentina because of its fame in that country despite Brazilian tango actually predating Argentinean tango.¹⁷

As with the debate over stylistic influences of tango, there are discrepancies over the exact time that tango first came to being. It is clear however, that by the beginning of the twentieth century, tango, as we know it, was already thriving. The “guardia vieja” (old guard) of tango established standard compositional practices with works such as *El Choclo* (1903) by Angel Villoldo and *El Marne* (1914) by Eduardo Arolas.¹⁸ These works helped to codify standard features of early tango music. These features include, 2/4 meter, regular four or eight bar phrase structures, and prominent use of habanera and sincopa rhythms (see *Figure 1*).¹⁹

Figure 1 Habanera and Sincopa Rhythms in Notation



The old guard also helped to establish the “orquesta típica” (typical orchestra) for tango music. Before this ensemble was established, tango groups usually consisted of three or four musicians. Common instruments for these groups included violin, flute, and harp

¹⁶ Richard Miller, “African Rhythms in Brazilian Popular Music: Tango Brasileiro, Maxixe and Choro,” in *Luso-Brazilian Review* 48/1 (2011), 6-7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁸ Kristin Wenland, “The Allure of Tango: Grafting Traditional Performance Practice and Style onto Art-Tangos,” in *College Music Symposium* 47 (2007), 2-3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

with the occasional addition of European instruments such as the accordion or the mandolin or available domestic instruments like the harmonica or guitar.²⁰ In contrast, the tango orchestras standardized by the old guard, and used through the 1950s, were fairly large and consisted of four violins, four bandoneones, piano, and bass. The exact instrumentation of this ensemble and the size of the sections varied greatly from region to region but the larger, orchestrated sound of a section-based ensemble defined early twentieth-century tangos.²¹

During the beginning of the twentieth century, tango was exported globally and became particularly popular in America and Europe. Several of the *guardia vieja* moved abroad, such as Arolas who moved to Paris in 1920.

While tango was flourishing abroad, at its home in Argentina tango fell out of popularity in the middle of the twentieth century until the 1990s when it experienced a revival.²² During the interim, a style of tango music known as “nuevo tango” (new tango) began to gain popularity.

Nuevo tango is a controversial title among tango musicians, especially in Argentina. Many believe that nuevo tango does not exist and should not be differentiated from traditional tango. Co-director of the DNI Tango School Dana Frígoli stated, “For me tango nuevo is a label for selling something . . . in my opinion the term says nothing . . . It’s as if tango nuevo doesn’t even exist.”²³ Even Astor Piazzolla, the composer most often credited with the creation of nuevo tango, rejects this name. Piazzolla himself stated, “In

²⁰ Luis Adolfo Sierra, *Historia de la Orquesta Típica: Evolución Instrumental del Tango*, (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Ediciones Corregidor, 1985): 18.

²¹ Morgan James Luker, “Tango Renovación: On the Uses of Music History in Post-Crisis Argentina,” in *Latin American Music Review* 28/1(Spring Summer 2007): 71-72.

²² Morgan James Luker, “Tango Renovación,” 68.

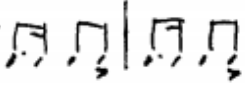
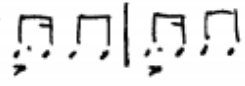
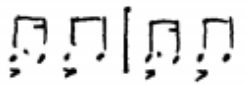
²³ Carolyn Merritt, *Tango Nuevo* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2012), 54.

Argentina, everything can change except the tango.”²⁴ For the purposes of this work, I am going to accept the term nuevo tango. I differentiate it from traditional tango as a means to discuss evolving performance practices in tango as they relate to tango in the United States and, in particular, of Astor Piazzolla. A more in depth review of nuevo tango will be presented in the following chapter.

Two of the most prominent stylistic characteristics of tango are the rhythmic patterns sincopa and habanera. Sincopa (syncopated) rhythm is characterized by an initial articulation on the beat followed by two offbeat articulations as seen in *Figure 1*. Syncopated rhythms are a feature of many African derived genres including Latin American dance genres and Jazz. The sincopa rhythmic figure is frequently used in tango music, both in melodic and accompaniment figures. The habanera rhythm is a dotted-eighth plus sixteenth pattern followed by two eighth notes. This rhythmic unit, however, is not unique to tango. It is likely that this rhythmic feature originated in Cuba and then found its way into many Latin American musical genres. In fact, the habanera rhythm is present in many of the styles offered as possible influences of tango by various musicologists (see *Figure 2*).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

Figure 2 Chart of Rhythmic Similarities Among Several Dance Genres²⁵

<i>CANDOMBE (1770)</i>	2/4 
<i>TANGO ANDALUZ (1850)</i> <i>HABANERA (1850)</i> <i>CREOLE TANGO (1880)</i>	2/4 
<i>MILONGA (1870)</i>	2/4 

Essentially, the previously mentioned musicians and musicologists heard the same tango music, recognizing the same rhythmic feature but associated and credited that feature to any of several sources from different cultures and geographic locations. This phenomenon has made a definitive answer to the origins of tango nearly impossible and, perhaps, says more about the researchers writing on tango than it does about tango itself. Applying the concept of a habitus of listening as presented in *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing* by Judith O. Becker may help to understand this particular phenomenon.²⁶ Each individual has a specific *habitus of listening*²⁷, developed from birth due to their culture, geographic location, upbringing, and any number of additional factors. This made it quite impossible for them to hear any influence on tango other than those that they cited. Similar to having a close association with a specific sent, each person developed an affiliation between certain musical characteristics that led

²⁵ Oscar Bozarelli, *Ochenta Años de Tango Platense* (La Plata: Editorial Osboz, 1972), 11 found in I-Ching Tsai, “The Evolution of the Tango and Astor Piazzolla’s Tango Nuevo,” (DMA diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2005), 6.

²⁶ Judith O. Becker, *Deep Listening: Music, Emotion, and Trancing*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 70-71.

²⁷ Becker adapts the concept of *habitus*, or a system of dispositions, from Bourdieu’s work to music. The *habitus of listening* is an unconscious action or reaction which is seemingly ‘natural,’ a particular way that each person listens to music without realizing it.

them to their conclusions. A closer examination into each writer under the lens of a *habitus of listening* would undoubtedly come up with very interesting results that could provide a fascinating study for further research.

CHAPTER 3

ASTOR PIAZZOLLA: LIFE AND STYLE

Tango has seen international popularity since the early decades of the twentieth century and is now one of the most immediately recognizable cultural exports of Argentina. The success of tango is evidenced by its inclusion in every aspect of modern culture. Indeed tango music is as presentable in a concert hall as a dance club, as commonly heard on the streets as it is in major motion picture and television soundtracks. While this international success began with tango musicians in countries like France in the 1920s, it was really the work of Astor Piazzolla during the following decades that propelled tango music to its highest standing. As such, this survey of tango history would not be complete without a reasonable discussion on Piazzolla, his life, and his contributions to tango. This is especially true since the new piece, *Tres Tangos para Duo de Contrabajos*, was directly inspired by the compositions of Piazzolla.

Astor was born in Mar del Plata, Argentina in 1921, the only child of Vicente and Mainetti Piazzolla.²⁸ He emigrated to New York with his parents at a young age.²⁹ Vicente bought a bandoneon (metal accordion like instrument) in a second-hand store in New York and gave it to his son, Astor, who was eight at the time. Although he did not take to it immediately, Piazzolla would later become one of the premier virtuosos on that

²⁸ Kerri Allen, "It Takes One to Tango: The Astor Piazzolla Legacy" in *The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education* 18/21 (July 28, 2008): 14-16.

²⁹ The exact date of this move is not agreed upon. In the article "It takes One to Tango: The Astor Piazzolla Legacy," Kerri Allen states that Piazzolla was born in 1921 and moved to New York with his family when he was fifteen. However, Oxford Online states that he made this move in 1924 and María Azzi and Simon Collier argue that Astor's journey to New York had to have happened after 29 March, 1925 as this is the date his first identification card was issued and this date is confirmed by Astor himself in his memoirs.

instrument. His initial interest in the bandoneon seems to have been altruistic rather than for a love of the instrument. Vicente was a fan of tango music; most nights the first thing he would do after arriving home was to play a tango record in their apartment. Astor recalls, “to give pleasure to the old man, I clumsily tried to learn.”³⁰ According to an interview included in his memoir, *Astor Piazzolla: A Memoir*, Piazzolla began studying the bandoneon a bit with Homero Pauloni during his brief return to Mar del Plata, because of the Great Depression.³¹ However, it was his teacher in New York, Béla Wilda, who really taught him to play the bandoneon through studying Bach by adapting the piano parts.³² Wilda was a neighbor of the Piazzolla’s in New York and a pupil of Serge Rachmaninoff.³³ Piazzolla recalls becoming hypnotized listening to Wilda play Bach on his piano. One day, he and his father knocked on Wilda’s door and struck a deal, trading music lessons for Astor in exchange for his mother giving Wilda free manicures and providing food twice a week in the form of a large bowl of pasta. Piazzolla recounts this event and their modest means with the statement, “hunger also knocks on the door where good music is heard.”³⁴

Piazzolla went on to study composition with Alberto Ginastera and Nadia Boulanger, the latter of who was responsible for inspiring Piazzolla to “seek a synthesis of what many saw as two irreconcilable musical spheres, the tango and the concert

³⁰ María Susanna Azzi and Simon Collier, *Le Grand Tango: The Life and Music of Astor Piazzolla* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8.

³¹ Natalio Gorin, *Piazzolla: A Memoir*, trans. Fernando Gonzalez (Portland, Amadeus Press, 2001), 33.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Azzi, *Le Grand Tango*, 13.

³⁴ Natalio Gorin, *Astor Piazzolla*, 125.

halls.”³⁵ Piazzolla recounts his time studying with Boulanger in Paris in some detail in his memoir. He was able to make the journey to Paris because he had won a scholarship the year before to study at the Fontainebleau conservatory as part of the Fabien Sevitzy Award.³⁶ Despite this award, money was very tight and he recalled having only enough money to eat every other day.³⁷

During Piazzolla’s first lessons with Boulanger, she reviewed several pieces that he had brought with him to Europe. Boulanger told him that the pieces were well written but had no spirit. She asked what music he played in his country. Piazzolla recalls feeling hesitant to tell her he was a humble tango musician and feared that if she knew the truth he would be thrown out of the conservatory. Eventually, he realized he could not hide who he was, and played a tango for Boulanger on his bandoneon. She then said: “Astor, this is beautiful . . . here is the true Piazzolla—do not ever leave him.”³⁸

Piazzolla was able to find a synthesis between tango and classical music and composed many concerti, large orchestra works, and chamber works that hold a prominent position in the performance repertoire to this day. Perhaps Peter Watrous of the *New York Times* put it best in 1988 when he wrote the following: “the brilliant Argentine composer [who] took tango and moved it away from its dance origins into an art context, infusing it with jazz and classical strains to develop an utterly distinctive compositional language.”³⁹ This infused style became known as nuevo tango.

³⁵ David Butler Cannata, “Making it There: Piazzolla’s New York Concerts,” in *Latin American Review* 26/1 (Spring-Summer 2005): 58.

³⁶ Gorin, *Astor Piazzolla*, 69-70.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

³⁹ Peter Watrous, “Seductive String Music Strikes a Global Chord,” *New York Times*, May 6, 1988.

Piazzolla, having been brought up in two different cultures, was exposed to many different musical styles in his early years. The musical genres he was exposed to in New York influenced his later musical style, chief among these genres were jazz and art music. During his time in New York, Piazzolla was also known to frequent jazz clubs in Harlem that clearly left an impression as some idioms of jazz can be seen in his compositions.⁴⁰ The influence from jazz and art music resulted in Piazzolla's new tango music having richer harmonies and rhythmic varieties when compared to more traditional tangos. This new tango style also included prolonged sections of improvisation, another feature of jazz music.⁴¹ Piazzolla set what would become the standard instrumentation for new tango groups as bandoneon, violin, piano, double bass, and electric guitar.⁴² This ensemble was significantly smaller than the standard tango orchestras of the previous decades. The inclusion of the electric guitar as part of the standard instrumentation for new tango can be seen as evidence of Piazzolla's time in New York and influence by the jazz scene of the New York. Early jazz guitarists struggled to be heard over the louder piano. This all changed in the 1930s and '40s with the advent and distribution of electric guitars.⁴³ Jazz guitarists were some of the first to take to the new instrument in significant numbers. Therefore, it is likely that the electric guitar was a feature of the jazz soundscape Piazzolla encountered in Harlem. However, this could also be seen as a return to traditional instruments. Piazzolla spent a significant amount of time in

⁴⁰ Allen, "It takes One to Tango," 14-16.

⁴¹ Gabriella Mauriño, "A New Body for a New Tango: The Ergonomics of Bandoneon Performance in Astor Piazzolla's Music," in *Galpin Society Journal* 62 (April 2009): 263.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Tom Wheeler, *The Guitar Book: A Handbook for Electric and Acoustic Guitarists* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978), 12.

Argentina and was acquainted with the traditional music of the country, much of which includes the guitar. There were many guitarists in Argentina during the first decades of the twentieth century, but guitar, without electric power or amplification, struggles to be heard over pianos and other instruments in a typical tango orchestra. It was not unheard of for guitarists to switch to bandoneon when playing tango.⁴⁴ The inclusion of the electric guitar can therefore be seen as a metaphor for nuevo tango itself, a mix of traditional Argentina and new America.

⁴⁴ Robert Farris Thompson, *Tango*, 180.

CHAPTER 4

ANDRÉS MARTÍN: ABOUT THE COMPOSER

A native of Buenos Aires, Argentina, Andrés Martín is a renowned double bass player and composer who currently resides in Tijuana, Mexico. In addition to holding the principal bass position with the Orquesta de Baja California, a post he has held since 2002, Martín is an accomplished soloist and chamber musician who has performed internationally. Martín is also the composer and arranger for Orquesta de Baja California and “Cuatro para Tango,” a tango quartet that he founded.⁴⁵ Perhaps Martín’s most well known compositions are the three-part series *Anna’s Gift* for chamber orchestra, narrator, and double bass soloist based on the story by Alan Scofield. The third and final part of this series, entitled “Anna’s Promise,” premiered in the United States in August 2016 with 32 other countries set to perform this work, featuring their native soloists, between October 2016 and June 2017.

Martín has also composed a double bass concerto that has gained international recognition. The concerto has been featured as a required piece on some of the largest international bass competitions over the last several years. He also enjoys composing for mixed media and has worked very often with choreographers setting his music to dance. During his annual bass festival he has demonstrated his interest in these collaborations, as well as his creativity, by inviting dancers and singers to perform his music with him, and, on one occasion, he invited them to dress up in a bass suit.

Martín considers the education of the next generation of musicians to be of the utmost importance. To this end he founded “Contrabajos de Baja California A.C.,” and

⁴⁵ “Andrés Martín- Bio,” Andrés Martín: Bassist, Composer, accessed March 28, 2017, <http://www.andresmartin.net/bio>.

“Encuentro Latinoamericano de Contrabajos,” both non-profit organizations dedicated to promoting double bass education over the state of Baja California.⁴⁶ Martín has also arranged a number of pieces for two double basses and regularly performs these with his students. This pedagogical practice is meant to aid the young musicians in developing vital musical skills.

⁴⁶ “Andrés Martín- Bio.”

CHAPTER 5

PERFORMING TANGO STYLE ON THE DOUBLE BASS

A common feature of nuevo tango music is the performance of extended techniques usually played on violin. Since I play the double bass and begrudgingly admit that I suffer from violin envy due to the vast amount of repertoire they have at their disposal, I am always interested in adding new music to the bass canon. Tango literature is a perfect addition for bassists as the genre already prominently features the bass. Additionally, the registral possibilities of the bass are well suited for both the traditional percussive accompaniment as well as the lyrical melodies ordinarily played by violin or bandoneon. To this end, I have attempted to replicate the sound and style of a tango violinist on my double bass. It became immediately apparent that I would need to adapt several of these extended violin techniques for bass. The primary material I used in my efforts included videos of tango bands and several video tutorials from a YouTube series entitled *Tango Techniques for Strings*, by Jeremy Cohen, violinist in Quartet San Francisco.

The first hurdle to overcome was the basic articulation used in tango music. The attack of each note seemed to be very sharp, almost percussive in nature; Cohen describes it as “pizzicato⁴⁷ with the bow.” The way most violinists seem to accomplish this is by suspending the bow over the string and dropping it very deliberately for each note, almost like an exaggerated version of spicatto.⁴⁸ After some experimenting I found a way to, quite convincingly, replicate the articulation and tone quality of the violinists.

⁴⁷ Pizzicato is a means of producing sound from a string with the finger rather than the bow, often my plucking or pulling the string.

⁴⁸ Spicatto is a bouncing bow stroke in which the hair comes off of the string and the resulting momentum is used to initiate the next articulation.

For each note, a great amount of pressure must be applied to the strings. There must be enough pressure that both the string and the hair on the bow bend inward. Then, at the exact same moment, I release the pressure and begin moving the bow across the string. In order to initiate this stroke, my shoulder and arm need to be completely relaxed so that the entire weight of my bones and muscles can be transferred from my back, to my hand, and finally to the bow and string. Additionally, I had to slightly rotate my arm toward my instrument allowing my thumb to act as a fulcrum to put even more pressure on the bow through the resulting torque. This starting position is not exceptionally comfortable as the ligaments running through my wrist are absorbing more tension than I would usually allow. However, the starting point, with hair in contact with string and a good amount of weight, occurs only the split second before the actual attack. This on-the-string- approach is more the act of planting the bow on the string and providing the pressure that can be released, initiating the upward motion of a more traditional spiccato. It took some time to achieve enough muscle memory so that my right arm and shoulder could set up this starting position very quickly, applying and releasing the pressure required for this stroke almost instantaneously.

In the article, “The Bass in Latin America: Tango Argentino,” Bishop describes this articulation as a “fierce, off-the-string downstroke of marcato playing.”⁴⁹ Bishop goes on to explain that this stroke must be done with a very small amount of hair, which is treated to a heavy coat of rosin. This method of producing the articulation requires a very literal interpretation of his instructions as the rosin must be sufficient to grip the string almost like a strip of fly paper, bringing the string with it on its way back up the vertical bow stroke. In my experimentation I did find this approach easier to accomplish

⁴⁹ Bishop, Marlon, “The Bass in Latin America: Tango Argentino,” in *Bass Player* 22/2 (Feb. 2011), 67.

on a French bow than my German bow.⁵⁰ I believe this is because the French bow hold places the hand directly above the bow hair and point of contact with the string. This allows for the weight of the arm to be placed directly above, or very near to, the contact point with the string. On a German bow, I found the method of planting the bow hair on the string before each attack to be a better means of achieving the desired articulation.

Since *Tres Tangos*, and many other pieces in this genre, require this technique to be executed in fast sections, making it impractical to plant each note on the string before the attack, I have developed an alternate means of achieving this sound. Performing an entirely vertical stroke with no horizontal movement in the arm or wrist. Instead of moving the arm or wrist horizontally during the vertical bounce of the bow, I angled my wrist vertically to match the bow. This caused the hair on the bow to roll across the string, gripping it, and bringing the string with the hair on its way back up.

Another important technique to master is “chicharra” (cricket). This effect makes a percussive sound similar to a guiro or scraping instrument. Violinists accomplish this by quickly stroking their bows across the backside of string, which lies between the bridge and the tailpiece. This is usually done with five fast notes, the first beginning on the last beat and the last ending on the downbeat of the next bar (*see Figure 3*).

Figure 3 Rhythmic Component of Chicharra in Notation



Attempting to replicate this on the bass presented me with the problem of trying to figure out how to reach all the way down with my bow. I cannot reach the distance to the

⁵⁰ French bows are held overhand similar to those used by violinists or cellists. German bows have larger frogs and are held underhand with the thumb on top of the stick and the hand holding the frog to the side.

backside of my bridge in my normal seated playing position. After experimenting with different playing postures, such as standing up, I discovered that the simplest way to accomplish this was by turning the bass ninety degrees toward my body while in a seated position. This way the strings and bridge are much closer to my body and I could more easily reach the desired area. This, however, did not solve my problems as I quickly learned that the pressure required to achieve the *chicharra* sound might be easily obtained on violin. This was, despite many attempts, nearly impossible to acquire on the thick bass strings. The solution I came up with is to bow across the winding at the bottom of the string instead of the string itself. This produced the desired sound instantly. What I have not quite figured out is what sort of adverse affect this innovation may have on my bow hair. It seems that there are at least some adverse affects since the winding on the string quickly came undone from the friction.

“Látigo” (Whip) is a very fast ornamental glissando that is used often by tango violinists. The quick whip-like sound of this technique adds to the drama of the tango music. This technique is, unsurprisingly, very difficult to replicate on the bass. The problem is that my instrument is very long. As I studied violinists execution of this glissando, I noticed that they press the string to the fingerboard and with their finger held down and whip the finger about two or three inches. This produces a sound that is quick and sharp and ascends a fifth or higher. When I tried to replicate this with the same two or three inches of distance, I accomplished roughly a major second of ascent, hardly as dramatic. In order to come close to replicating the interval I would need to play in the very highest position of my instrument where the intervals are much closer together, which is not terribly practical. I attempted to increase the distances I slid my finger and hit another barrier, friction. After just a few inches the friction between my finger, the string, and the fingerboard would drastically slow the speed of my finger,

achieving a less dramatic and stickier sound that would certainly be out of place in a tango setting. Only by reducing this friction could I achieve a longer slide, and for that, I took the fingerboard out of the equation. Instead of pressing the string into the fingerboard, I discovered that by forming my index finger into a hook and pulling the string away from me during the glissando I could move very quickly over larger distances, therefore coming close to a látigo sound. Beginning the glissando with the finger pressed on the fingerboard and lifting it off during the slide could also achieve this sound.

Látigo is most effective when the left hand glissando is reinforced with the articulation in the right hand. The attack should be very light with a quick acceleration in the bow to match the whip-like slide in the left hand. The acceleration of the bow should continue through the release, giving the end of the note a sharp quality. Executed properly, this bow stroke can be effective even without the left hand component. Indeed, many recordings of tango musicians feature this type of whip bow articulation, especially on down beats.

“Tambor” (drum) is a percussive pizzicato technique used by tango violinists. Tango ensembles have traditionally not included percussion instruments, so violinists use this unique pizzicato style to imitate the sound of a drum. According to a video published on YouTube by Stradmagazine entitled “Tango Effects- Tambor” this is accomplished by dampening the strings with your fingers at approximately the third position located near the neck block.⁵¹ With the string muted by the musician’s fingers, a vertical pizzicato produces a low thud reminiscent of a timbale. When attempting to duplicate this effect on the bass I quickly found that it was difficult to find a place to dampen the strings that would not result in a harmonic tone ringing through the thud.

⁵¹ Caroline Pearsall, “Tango Effects- Tambor,” published August 15, 2016 by Stradmagazine, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBoaMXymQeU>.

From my experiments, I believe the best location for one's left hand would be first position with all four of the fingers dampening the string to avoid overtones as much as possible. String II seemed to yield the best results for this technique as the lower strings did not respond with the percussive attack on the front end of the note. The highest string also worked well in orchestral tuning but on the very thin gauge of solo strings this produced an insufficient sound.

While *tambor* is a common technique used by violinists, double bass players rarely, if ever, use it. The reality is, while my experiments did result in some promising sounds, there is little point in attempting to replicate a drum in this way when our instrument itself can be used as a drum, the body of the double bass is very large and can be struck by a musician's hand resulting in a drum-like sound. Furthermore, striking different locations of the bass can result in different drum sounds, giving a tango bass player a faux drum kit at their disposal. The back of the bass, when struck with an open palm, imitates the sound of a bass drum. The sides of the bass give a higher pitched and shorter sound. The strings and fingerboard can even be struck with an open hand to produce a sharp, metallic sound. Knuckles and fingers can also be used to give a variety of sounds and articulations.

The "fueye" effect is a type of vibrato used by accordion and bandoneon players. These instruments do not have the ability to alter the pitch of notes to create the oscillation vibrato used by string players so they alter the airflow. By slightly shaking their arms airflow from the bellows of the instrument alternates slow and fast. This change in airflow creates a vibrato sound in a held pitch. Andrés Martín has begun replicating this sound on the bass, a feature of tango bass that has not existed previously. To accomplish this the musician must alter the speed of the bow much like the

bandoneon player alters the speed of the bellows.⁵² On a single bow, up bow seems to work better than down bow, a slight shaking of the arm will activate the wrist and, in turn, the bow. These shakes create surges of sound during the continuous up bow stroke. This motion needs to be kept very small to achieve a vibrato-like sound. A larger motion will sound more like a string of separately articulated notes on a single bow rather than the fueye effect. Additionally, the motion should never come off of the string or stop completely during the held note. The intention should remain for this effect to be done on a held note with the shaking motion adding color to the note rather than the bow articulating multiple notes during this effect.

The final tango technique I will discuss is strapatta. This is a two-note decorative pick-up with a third final note landing on the downbeat. These notes are created by throwing the bow in a fashion similar to ricochet bowing, letting the momentum of the bow bouncing off of the string create the first two articulations and quickly changing bow direction to articulate the final note. It is of the utmost importance that this effect be done in the proper area of the bow. In order to achieve the bright, energetic sound the bow needs to be thrown at the string with a good amount of intensity while still allowing the tension of the bow hair and string to repel each other and create the bounce. If this is done too close to the frog, the bounce will not occur, and if it is done too close to the tip, the hair will not dig into the string enough to create the desired sound. Therefore, I would recommend attempting this technique at about the upper one-third mark of the bow. Of course, this will change based on the length and camber⁵³ of each individual bow

⁵² Andrés Martín, Facebook message to author, March 20, 2018.

⁵³ The camber of a bow refers to the arch of the wood and is defined by both shape and depth. Skilled bow makers can recognize the strength of a piece of wood and camber the stick for optimal playability.

and the technique of the player, but a good starting place would be placing the hair approximately at the point where the curvature of the bow begins to bend back upward.

Tango musicians also frequently replicate the quick triplet figure of strapatta with pizzicato. Violinists will often hold the bow with their thumb and first finger, freeing up the fourth, third, and second fingers to be placed on a string and quickly release in that order to create a strum-like triple attack. This approach can also work for bass players using French bows. French bow players could also consider holding the bow between their thumb and palm and using fingers three, two, and one to draw more sound. This technique is perhaps slightly harder for German bow players. When switching from arco to pizzicato, most German bow players will put their fourth finger through the frog and slide the bow backwards to free up the index finger. This approach limits the movement of the third finger, making the triple attack near impossible. For this technique it will be necessary to hold the bow with the thumb. This makes three consecutive fingers available but puts the bow in an insecure position.

CHAPTER 6

PROGRAM NOTES: *TRES TANGOS PARA DUO DE CONTRABAJOS*

Tres Tangos para Duo de Contrabajos was written by Andrés Martín in 2017 and commissioned by Darren Cueva. The work features a variety of idioms including features of nuevo tango and contemporary art music in addition to a number of compositional techniques. The work is in three movements: Microcentro, Balvanera, and La feria de San Telmo. Each movement is named for a neighborhood in Buenos Aires, Argentina that inspired its composition.

Microcentro is the economic heart of Buenos Aires. The area encompasses nearly sixty city blocks and includes banks, businesses, government buildings, and the Buenos Aires Stock Exchange. According to a 2010 census, over one million people circulate Microcentro daily, leading to an ongoing city plan to extend the area to roughly seventy blocks.⁵⁴ The fast-paced, big-city energy of this area is captured from the first gesture of the piece with fast sixteenth notes racing up and down tetrachords in both bass parts. This running figure begins quietly, as if signifying the morning commutes to work, which even at the quiet morning hours, is fast moving. As the movement progresses, there are moments of relief from this running motive, but they never last, a reminder that the economic center of the city is always going.

The neighborhood of Balvanera is named for la Parroquia de Nuestra Señora de Balvanera (the Parish of Our Lady of Balvanera) built in 1831.⁵⁵ Balvanera is located close to Microcentro but features a culture far removed from the fast pace business

⁵⁴ “Microcentro, avanzan las obras de peatonalización,” Buenos Aires Ciudad, accessed February 11, <http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/noticias/microcentro-avanzan-las-obras-de-peatonalizacion>.

⁵⁵ “Balvanera,” Buenos Aires Ciudad, accessed February 11, 2018, <http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/laciudad/barrios/balvanera>.

center. The main attractions to this neighborhood are the theaters and galleries. Balvanera is also residential, housing some 160,000 residents as of the 2001 census, the most recent census of the area on the government website.⁵⁶ With widespread gentrification of the area, it is safe to assume that this number is significantly higher today. Martín was himself from this neighborhood and he refers to this movement as homage to his childhood days. Martín stated, “I spent a lot of time in the streets playing with friends and living good adventures.”⁵⁷ This movement begins calmly, as if waking up in your childhood bed, without a care, and proceeds to a beautiful melody that seems somewhat innocent. As the movement progresses, the marking “Robusto (tanguero)” appears, which is active and playful, perhaps representative of playing with childhood friends and, like any good childhood adventure, this section features a moment of disagreement characterized by the basses playing a tone apart from each other. This is soon followed by a section of parallel fourths creating a primal march inspired by the rock music that served as the soundtrack for Martín’s youth. The soundscapes of this movement, tranquil, playful, and primal, could be seen as a day living a childhood adventure.

“La feria de San Telmo” (The fair at San Telmo) is an antique fair and cultural event that has taken place each Sunday since 1970. Each Sunday, the fair attracts roughly 20,000 visitors seeking artistic and cultural items sold at any of its 270 stands. Most visitors to the fair are tourists in search of traditional Argentinian items and the musicians are equally eager to show off their traditional art during the festivities. Tango music and dance can be seen and heard both on the streets near the fair as well as during

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Andrés Martín, email message to author, December, 14, 2017.

official events.⁵⁸ Martín chose to capture this scene in the third and final movement of this collection. The top of the movement is marked “Milonga,” evoking a more traditional style of tango as one might imagine hearing while walking about the fair. In a way the musicians take the role of street performers for this movement. The first sounds heard are rhythmically charged octaves in both basses, as if sounding the call to passerby’s that they are beginning their performance. This movement is much more playful than the previous two and almost begs the listeners to participate in the experience by dancing.

⁵⁸ “Bienvenidos,” Feria de San Telmo, accessed February 11, 2018, <http://www.feriadesantelmo.com/menu.htm>.

CHAPTER 7

PERFORMANCE GUIDE: *TRES TANGOS PARA DUO DE CONTRABAJOS*

For the purposes of this guide I will not provide a note-by-note outline of appropriate articulations, bowings, and fingerings. Instead, I will focus on what I deem the most crucial moments from each movement and provide context as well as my opinion for best practice.

Rhythmic Considerations

Perhaps the most important consideration for a successful performance of this piece is rhythm. This piece is a stylized tango, perhaps more similar to the concert works of Piazzolla than to a tango band heard on the streets of San Telmo. Despite this, rhythmic elements of this piece follow tango idioms and become a driving force in the composition. As with many tango works, this piece regularly features the habanera and sincopa rhythms. The habanera rhythm is especially frequent being featured prominently in each of the three movements of the piece. Additionally, multiple variations of the rhythm are presented. As seen previously, the habanera rhythm in its most common and basic form consists of a dotted-eighth-note followed by sixteenth-note and two eighth notes. An example of this can be seen in the third movement “La feria de San Telmo” (*see Figure 4a*).

Perhaps the most common presentation of the habanera rhythm in this piece excludes the third note of the pattern. This simplification of the pattern allows the habanera to remain comprehensible to both audience and performer while more elaborate musical material is being played simultaneously. (*see Figure 4b*).

Figure 4

a.) *Tres Tangos para Duo de Contrabajos*, mov. III, “La feria de San Telmo,” m. 12

b.) *Tres Tangos para Duo de Contrabajos*, mov. I, “Microcentro,” m. 10



Figure 4a shows an example of habanera rhythm while figure 4b features a simplified version of habanera

The third movement plays more like a dance tango than the other movements. The movement opens with syncopations played in rhythmic unison between the two parts. This syncopated figure is repeated in the first bass while the second plays a very typical tango accompaniment. This paradigm continues through the opening section with the first bass playing the melody while the second accompanies with a written out tango bass line including habanera and syncopated rhythms. The rhythmic content of the melodic line in the first bass part also frequently consists of syncopations. The rhythmic accuracy of both parts is critical to a successful performance. During the movement, syncopations are presented with running sixteenth-notes, triplets, and with different syncopated patterns. Even slight hesitation or inaccuracy in the rhythm would cause the music to feel uncomfortable and could result in an ineffective performance.

As a final note on rhythm, this piece includes feathered beams (*see Figure 5*). A feathered beam is notated with one straight beam and one angled beam, connecting a group of note heads. This is usually used to indicate a gradual change in the rhythm of the underlying notes. However, Martín uses this notation to indicate the fueye effect spoken of previously. Since this is a new technique for bass players, in fact it is a technique being pioneered for bass by Martín, there is no standard way to notate fueye.

In context I believe that both of the bars featuring fueye should be interpreted as separate ideas and both begin on an up bow since it seems to be easier to achieve the effect in that way. For each bar the fueye effect should be initiated and then taper off completing the idea before the next bar begins.

Figure 5 *Tres Tangos para Duo de Contrabajos*, mov. I, “Microcentro,” m. 52



Articulation Considerations

It is with articulation that the extremes of tango are perhaps the most evident. The juxtaposition between bel canto style lyrical melodies and an aggressive, vigorously accented accompaniment is one of the most unique features of the genre. Through the course of this piece, both parts assume a variety of roles, from strong and driving, to beautiful and song-like. As such, particular care needs to be given to the context of every passage and articulations need to be deliberate.

The beginning of the piece features running sixteenth-notes that return several times during the movement. Since the first presentation is given with a triple piano dynamic marking, I would recommend articulating from the middle of the bow if not the upper one third and beginning from the string to control the attack as much as possible. Throughout this passage, I would advise an on-the-string approach as it will provide the most clarity at fast speed and articulate the accents in the wrist. Patterns of accents should be carefully articulated to bring out rhythmic groupings within continuous notes. These patterns could highlight the major beats or outline a habanera rhythm or syncopation. There are also several instances where the two bass parts have accents in

different rhythms, which makes the clarity of accented notes more important (see figure 6). Since the articulation of these accents is critical to the comprehension of underlying rhythms, coming away from the accent will be much more important than the accent itself. If all non-accented notes are played at a lower dynamic, the performer will be able to simply add a little more energy and impulse in the wrist. This should give the desired impact without slowing down or affecting the fast, rhythmic drive of the passage.

Figure 6 *Tres Tangos para Duo de Contrabajos*, mov. I, “Microcentro,” m. 5



Accent patterns in this piece often relate to habanera or sincopa rhythms as seen in the first part of this example or provide complimentary rhythms as seen in the second part.

Not all accent marks in this piece are equal however. Directly after the opening section, after the double bar at m. 10 (previous figure), the second bass part plays a variation of the habanera rhythm, and the score indicates fortissimo and accent. Here, the accents serve more as a reminder to the performer to feature the habanera rhythm and would recommend that they are approached with a lot of weight both hypothetically and literally. While this accent should sound heavy, the first note must also be played on the lowest, and therefore thickest, string on the bass. Applying weight to the string through the bow before the attack takes place and keeping the weight slightly heavier during the beginning of the note will achieve the desired sound. In order to make the rhythm comprehensible, this weight should be lightened to produce a more ordinary sound making the next heavy attack stand out.

In general, dots on top of notes should be interpreted as a tango idiom rather than a spiccato articulation. These notes should be initiated from off the string with a lot of speed and energy going into the string, gripping for an instant, and coming off again sharply to produce the “pizz with the bow” sound. Passages will frequently include notes with dots as well as notes with accents. In these situations, accented notes should be interpreted with an in-the-string articulation, while those with dots should be interpreted off-the-string. The more distinction that can be given to these different articulation markings, both in sense of attack and sustain of notes, the more effective the performance will be. An example of effective use of this distinction is the different articulations for syncopations in “La feria de San Telmo. The second bass part, presenting an accompaniment figure, is given dots over the syncopated notes. The first bass, playing a more melodic line, is not given dots and is occasionally given an accent mark over syncopated notes. This should be taken literally as the second part is more rhythmically charged and a sharp pizz sound with little sustain would drive the accompaniment and energize the melodic material. The melody, on the other hand, should be less percussive and play the syncopations in more of a vocal style with more sustain on the string. The juxtaposition of these two articulations occurring simultaneously makes each part instantly comprehensible, in addition to adding depth and interest to the performance (*see Figure 7a*).

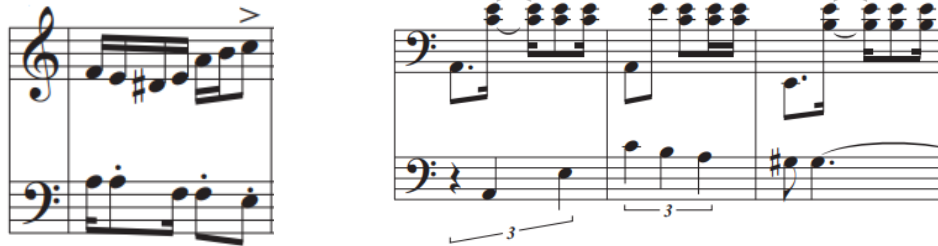
Example 7

7a) *Tres Tangos para Duo de Contrabajos*, mov. III, “La feria de San Telmo,” m. 26

7b) *Tres Tangos para Duo de Contrabajos*, mov. III, “La feria de San Telmo,” mm. 69-71

7a

7b



Both examples 7a and 7b demonstrate juxtaposition of articulations found throughout this work and the need for performers to carefully interpret dots, accents, tenuto lines and legato notes.

Lyrical moments should be reflected by the most connected and smooth articulation possible. Generally speaking, the first two to three inches of hair closest to the frog should be avoided, especially for passages in the higher registers of the instrument. Bow changes should be done using a fairly quick moving bow with as little weight as possible. One exception to this is found after rehearsal D in “La feria de San Telmo” (see Figure 7b). The first bass part plays a rhythmically active accompaniment made somewhat robust with the inclusion of double stops while the second part plays a lyrical melody marked expressive. This expressive part should of course be played with beautiful tone, but the articulation should be clearly marked, as the register would make it hard to distinguish over the first bass part otherwise.

Throughout this piece both bass parts assume the role of soloist and accompaniment at various times. During the accompaniment section the musician must take the role of a bass player in a tango band. Characteristic articulations and tango idioms are critical for a successful interpretation of these accompaniment moments. One example from the Bass II part, found in “Microcentro,” should alternate between arrestre

for the accented notes, and the sharp “pizz with the bow” style articulation for the notes with dots (see Figure 8).

Figure 8 *Tres Tangos para Duo de Contrabajos*, mov. I, “Microcentro,” mm. 51-52



With the inclusion of these two articulations, this seemingly simple accompaniment figure becomes a driving force, energizing the performance. Performers should also note that while some passages feature notated slur marks to indicate arrastre articulation, this is not typically done in tango music. Arrastre, like many tango techniques, is predominantly improvised and included at the discretion of the performer. It would be appropriate to add arrastre articulations to several passages in both bass parts even though they are not specifically notated as such. An example of this can be found in the Bass I part of the second movement, “Balvanera,” after rehearsal B (see Figure 9). Each downbeat in this passage could, quite appropriately, be performed with arrastre articulation and even a latigo style left hand gliss. This could be done for every bar or only on select measures to the performers discretion.

Figure 9 *Tres Tangos para Duo de Contrabajos*, mov. II, “Balvanera,” mm. 18-19



Bass I can likewise benefit from mastering these two basic tango articulations. In the third movement, Bass I plays an accompaniment style figure alone for eight bars before continuing as the second bass part presents melodic material. If this solo passage

is done with contrasting articulations it can be a truly magnificent moment in the piece; if not, this could be forgettable at best. The secret to the first bar of the repeated pattern is holding the tied note as long as possible and adding pressure to the bow to plant the next attack while the note is still being held, then making a sharp and tight articulation off of the release. The second bar requires the same pizzicato style bow articulation for the dotted note followed by a quick recovery so the next note can be held long. This will require the musician to relax their arm, allowing the weight to sink into the bow making the articulation long without causing any unwanted residual bouncing in the hair (*see Figure 10*).

Figure 10 *Tres Tangos para Duo de Contrabajos*, mov. III, “La feria de San Telmo,” mm. 58-59



Any time either the habanera rhythm or syncopations are present it will be important to mark these by use of articulation. For example, in m. 18 of the last movement, both basses play the habanera rhythm but the composer has added an extra sixteenth-note to each of the beats (*see Figure 11*). It is crucial that the first note be given a slightly heavier or more clearly defined articulation so that the habanera comes out. At the very least the performer should be careful not to inadvertently accent the added sixteenth-note in the pattern. This would cause the first note, which should be the focus, to sound like a pick-up.

Figure 11 *Tres Tangos para Duo de Contrabajos*, mov. III, “La feria de San Telmo,” m. 18



Fingering Considerations

On first glance, this piece is intimidating. The technical demands on the performers are significant; since they must be executed within a piece that is also rhythmically active this piece should be performed by advanced students. However, with a few strategic fingerings, the most technically demanding passages can be performed with confidence.

The piece begins with sixteenth-notes in both parts that play in parallel fifths. While not difficult at first, the pattern sequences upward until both parts are playing tetrachords in the highest register on the instrument without the security of a harmonic anchor. While both parts could be played with thumb anchors on the G₅⁵⁹ harmonic and D₅ harmonic respectively, this approach requires the passage to be played on two adjacent strings. Forcing the fingers to physically move to a different string more than negates the benefit of a slightly more comfortable left hand position. With such small intervals in the high register, any additional motion only serves to risk losing pitch. Additionally, this approach adds complication to the bow hand that would otherwise be

⁵⁹ I have used the standard numbering system for pitches as they are seen in the score of this piece. Please note that double bass music is traditionally notated one octave above the sounding pitch. Therefore the actual sounding pitch of this harmonic is G₄. This will hold true for all following pitches given which will be labeled based on what is seen in the notation rather than what would actually be heard. For reference, middle C on a keyboard is labeled C₄ with numbers going up and down to reflect the octaves.

left on one string, making it easier to get an even tone in the notoriously tricky register. Shifting to the harmonic with fingers two and one respectively sets up the hand to hold a fixed position, allowing the repeated tetrachords to be played without shifting or string crossing (see Figure 12).

Figure 12 *Tres Tangos para Duo de Contrabajos*, mov. I, “Microcentro,” m. 7



In the next running sixteenth-note section from the first movement there is a figure, which features octave D's (D5 and D4) with lower neighbor tones. Despite the complications mentioned above, I believe that a fingering with adjacent strings is the most effective approach for this figure. In the first part the high D5 is played with third finger and the neighbor tone with first. While these notes are sounding the thumb should be anchored on the octave D4 harmonic on the D string ready to play. While the thumb's note is ringing, the hand position must be collapsed so that the neighbor tone C4 can be sounded on the A string followed by another D4 with the thumb. Once again, the brief moment when the thumb is playing the harmonic gives an opportunity for the hand to assume the next needed position extending back to the octave to play the high D5 with the third finger again. The same approach is recommended for the second part, but since the part is one octave lower than the first, the open D string can be used to facilitate the shift to and from the low neighbor tone (see Figure 13).

Figure 13 *Tres Tangos para Duo de Contrabajos*, mov. I, “Microcentro,” m. 40



When the running motive returns in the piece it is slightly altered and a tone lower than the first presentation. The beginning of this section is relatively simple as far as fingerings since it can be easily played in the basic thumb position with thumb anchored on the octave G harmonic. However, the climax of this phrase culminates with a descending sequence beginning on G4. Due to the small intervals and relative insecure position, this passage requires an efficient fingering in order to have a high success rate. I would suggest a fingering that mirrors the sequential motion of the phrase, playing each tetrachord on one string with consecutive fingers, 3, 2, 1, and thumb (see *Figure 14*). While thumb is playing the final note of the for note pattern the hand must compress, allowing the third finger to situate a third above the thumb and prepare the hand for the following notes. The intervals change as the pattern progresses, therefore careful attention should be paid to setting the hand position for each iteration.

Figure 14 *Tres Tangos para Duo de Contrabajos*, mov. I, “Microcentro,” m. 78



The adagio section of the first movement contains a descending figure that merits further examination. The first three notes, D6, C6, and G5, could all be played on harmonics on the G and D strings. The next note, Eb5, could be played by compressing the left hand to a chromatic finger position and playing first finger on the D string, directly leading into the next note, D5, played with thumb. The two reasons I would not opt for this method, despite its obvious merits, are that the C6 harmonic will sound extremely out of tune and the likelihood of landing the E flat in tune is low. After the D5 harmonic, the next note, C5, will require a substantial shift to a relatively insecure note. In performance this will at best sound choppy and at worst sound out of tune. An alternate fingering would be to play D6 as a harmonic and C6 as a closed note with second finger. This will require some practice, especially if this area of the fingerboard is not as familiar, but the proper spacing between fingers should be relatively easy to find and memorize. After completing this note, one can shift to third finger on G5, which, as a harmonic, will add security and a brief moment to locate the exact center of the pitch. This will put the completion of the passage in a lower area on the fingerboard allowing for a smoother and more secure shift to the lower register (*see Figure 15*).

Figure 15 *Tres Tangos para Duo de Contrabajos*, mov. I, “Microcentro,” m. 59



As the second part takes over the melodic material I would advise that similar fingerings be employed. Specifically, in m. 68, while the harmonics for A5 and E5 seem like the safest approach, I recommend staying on the G string to facilitate shorter shifts. During this section the first part plays an accompaniment of mostly eighth-notes which

frequently go to A4. Shifting to and from this note is difficult and also insecure given the notes preceding and following it; therefore, I would recommend using the fifth harmonic on the D string, which will produce the desired pitch. In bars with two A4's, this harmonic can be used for both or used on only the first A4 to facilitate a shift to the second. I would advise the use of the latter fingering as the sound of a closed A will be warmer.

The second movement prominently features parallel fourths in both parts. Fourth's are particularly challenging for basses since the strings are tuned in fourth's; therefore the notes must be played directly adjacent to each other. A simple rule for fingering this section would be to play anything in the lower parts of the instrument (anything lower than the neck block approximately a fifth above the open string) with one finger placed across both strings as a bar. Above the neck block this bar technique is less effective as the thumb cannot anchor the hand under the neck and the extended position of the arm makes it difficult to place the finger perpendicular across the fingerboard. I would recommend a forked finger technique for the fourth's in these positions. Forked fingers means that you play each of the notes with a different finger, which are positioned one on top of the other. Since the middle finger is the longest, I would recommend using this for the lower note and forking with the third finger above it. This should offer the most relative comfort and provide the best opportunity to play the double stop in tune.

The last movement contains difficult passages, but for the most part, they are straightforward and anyone with an intermediate to advanced knowledge of the bass should be able to come up with effective fingerings. There is one passage at the end of the movement, beginning in the pick-up to m. 139, that is the exception to this rule as it does not lay under the fingers well regardless of the fingering choice. Both parts play the

passage in octaves and each part presents unique challenges. My solution to the second part is to begin the first interval, which is a fourth, with a forked fingering. Directly after the fork the player can shift to extended position where the majority of the passage will take place. The first part is slightly more complicated as the position is too high to securely fork the first interval. The best solution is to play the first note, E5, with either first finger or thumb and extend the third finger for the fourth. After this, the next two bars can be played in position with the thumb anchored on the D5 harmonic. Despite the uncomfortable string crossings required, I do not believe there is a more effective fingering solution to this passage (see Figure 16).

Figure 16 *Tres Tangos para Duo de Contrabajos*, mov. III, “La feria de San Telmo,” m. 139



One of the most challenging aspects of this piece is the register. This is of particular concern to the first bass part, which is frequently asked to play in the very highest parts of the fingerboard. Often, these passages cannot be substituted for harmonics since they include notes such as B flat and E flat, forcing the bassists to play in an area unfamiliar to most. That does not mean that this piece should not be set aside. The score was written in such a way that these moments can be played an octave lower without any major ramifications to the music. The two bass lines are often set in complimentary manners and will not get in each others way despite closing the registral gap between them.

Practical Considerations

The first practical decision musicians must make before beginning this piece is which tuning to use. Double basses have two standard tunings, orchestral and solo. Orchestral tuning, which is also standard for jazz, rock, bluegrass, and most other ensemble playing, begins on an E and is tuned up in fourths resulting in a tuning of E, A, D, G. In order to give more brilliance projection to the sound, soloists use strings that are gauged to be tuned one whole step higher than orchestral tuning resulting in a tuning of F#, B, E, A. Normally, the type of strings and tuning a bassist will use is dependent on the type of playing they are doing. Since this piece was written for two basses with no additional instrumentation, it can be played using either tuning. For many unaccompanied pieces, like the Bottesini duets or the Bach Cello Suites, I prefer to use solo strings as they add clarity and brilliance to the performance. This piece could certainly be performed in solo tuning for the same reasons. Both bass parts contain passages in the highest registers of the instrument. The benefits of solo strings are particularly valuable in this register as the notes are easier to articulate and sustain and sound with a cleaner tone.

There is also an argument to be made for performing this piece in orchestral tuning. Since the piece is in a tango style many of the accompaniment figures would benefit from a little more depth to the sound, which orchestral strings can provide. Additionally, orchestral strings are made in a thicker gauge that can absorb more force and weight from the bow. For the premiere of this piece Martín and I decided to perform in solo tuning. This was done to aid in the clarity of the fast passages. This was also done, in some part, out of necessity. Martín was unable to make the trip to Arizona with his bass so Catalin Rotaru offered his instrument. This instrument had solo strings and the

short amount of rehearsal time made it impractical to change the strings. I believe that the piece would have been equally successful had we been playing on orchestral strings.

Another practical consideration is how the low D should be played. As stated above bass tuning typically goes down to E₁ (notated an octave higher as E₂), however, this piece has D₁ written in both parts. This note is one whole step below the lowest pitch and does not exist on many basses. It is standard for orchestra musicians to play on five string instruments or add a fingerboard extension to their four string instruments in order to play notes below E₁. If, like me, you do not own a bass with an extension your option is to use a drop D tuning where you tune your lowest string to a D instead of E. This option is, perhaps, more beneficial for the second part as it uses sub E₁ pitches (E flat and D) much more commonly than the first part. Additionally, the passages, which call for these pitches are not particularly fast or technical making it reasonably simple to learn to play the rest of the part in a different tuning. However, this is not strictly necessary. If a player chooses, these sub E₁ pitches could be brought up an octave with very little impact on the musical line. This would be the approach I recommend for the first part if the performer does not own a bass with five strings or an extension.

Tempo is always a major performance consideration. For this piece, as with any piece, I would advise the performer to choose a speed which can be played cleanly and clearly. The opening of the first movement features pianissimo sixteenth notes with the tempo marking given of quarter note at 120 beats per minute (bpm). For many players, myself included, this tempo would only be possible by sacrificing tone and clarity. A slightly calmer tempo, perhaps in the 108 bpm range, would not sound any slower to an audience. In fact, the slower tempo would facilitate better tone, clarity, and synchronization between the parts. This would give the overall impression of faster playing. The best council would be to identify the most technically challenging parts

within a section, often that will be the parts with the most or largest shifts or intricate string crossings, and base your tempo for the section on how quickly this passage can be executed well.

Finally, take a moment to consider your choice of rosin. Many factors contribute to tone production on a string instrument: strings, bow, bow hair, the instrument itself. However, these are often expensive and time consuming to change. Rosin is a factor that can be changed very quickly, even directly before the performance, and is relatively inexpensive. A new cake of rosin will only cost between ten and thirty dollars depending on the brand. This quick and inexpensive change to a players set up can greatly impact the quality, color palate, attack, and sustain of tones. As mentioned above, tango bassists often use a thick layer of rosin to give a sharp and percussive quality to their attacks. This is the approach I would recommend for the second bass in these duets as this part features most of the tango idioms. To aid in this, I would recommend a soft rosin that can be applied to the hair in thicker amounts. The most common and widely available, not to mention inexpensive, soft rosin is Pops. This is a great choice for this piece as it provides a great deal of grip, and unless applied in excess, does not greatly hinder lyrical playing. For this part it may be appropriate to apply more than one would for an orchestra concert; however, it is imperative to find the balance between articulation and grit as too much will impair ones ability to play with agility or lyricism, especially in the upper registers. Pops would also be good rosin for the first bass part, although I would suggest applying less than the second bass. Other options for relatively soft bass rosin would be Oak rosin (either soft or soft plus) or Kolsteins Ultra Rosin Soft. As all seasoned players know, the weather greatly impacts the playability of rosin and should be taken into account. This is especially true with soft rosins as they react much differently in hot climate than cold. I would advise against the use of overly hard rosin or cello rosin. These

have become popular lately, especially for players who focus on lyrical solo playing. These rosins can produce very pure and beautiful tones and give less crunch and more control in the upper register, but that is exactly why they should not be used. The aggressive articulation and characteristic energetically charged notes would be all but impossible to produce with these rosins.

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