

Ástor Piazzolla was born in Argentina to Italian parents but grew up mainly in New York City. This international upbringing brought him equally eclectic musical influences. He heard old tangos and big-band jazz music as a child and was a prodigy on the bandoneon, an accordion-like instrument with buttons instead of keys. At age 16, he moved back to Argentina to play tangos in night clubs and study Western music with composer Ginastera, from whom he learned of the music of Stravinsky, Bartók, Ravel, and others. A trip to Paris in 1953 to study with the reverent Nadia Boulanger solidified his style as a fusion of all to which he had been exposed. This style has been coined “nuevo tango” and is characterized by the incorporation of jazz and classical elements into the tango. From the 1960s until his death, Piazzolla split his time between Paris, Argentina, and New York, and his success as a composer, bandleader, and bandoneonist never ceased. He is now known as one of the greatest tango composers of all time.

The history of the tango is as diverse as that of Piazzolla. It emerged around 1880 from the slums of Buenos Aires and Montevideo, where many European immigrants and a variety of native Argentinians resided. It started as a musical genre associated with dance and was characterized by sensuousness, eroticism, and the musical fusion of the many cultures that contributed to it. It soon began to appeal to the upper class and around 1910 moved from the slums to the downtown cafés. At that time, it also became the rage in Paris, London, and the United States and from then continued to grow internationally in popularity throughout the 20th century. Inevitably, a myriad of types of tango now exist, from ballroom to Finnish to Piazzolla’s nuevo tango.

Histoire du Tango was written by Piazzolla later in his life, when his success offered him the freedom to be more musically experimental. Originally for flute and guitar, the piece is often played on violin and guitar, as well as with other combinations. The piece traces the history of the tango in 30-year intervals. The first movement, *Bordello 1900*, depicts the tango still in the slums of Buenos Aires. Good-natured women in brothels chatter in many languages and tease the men who come to see them. Occasionally the habanera rhythm makes an appearance in the guitar part, pointing to the ancestry of the tango. The mood is relaxed and infused with the eroticism of the bordello slums.

The second movement, *Continental Café 1930*, puts the tango in downtown cafés, where people listened to tangos instead of dancing to them. The mood is romantic and the harmonies melancholy. After an opening guitar cadenza, the violin sings a gloomy tune, marked *molto espressivo*. This section trails off into a major section ripe with nostalgia, and a return of the first section ends the movement on a sad note.

The third movement, *Night Club 1960*, is in Piazzolla’s standard form of fast–slow–fast–slow–coda. Its decisive fast sections depict people rushing to hear the new tango and contrast with the slow, wistful sections. International influences are seen by the occasional inclusion of the Brazilian bossa nova rhythm in the guitar part. A virtuosic coda brings the movement to a flourishing end.

The fourth movement, *Modern-day Concert*, showcases the tango of the present and future. Though not atonal, the movement illustrates Piazzolla’s interest in extreme dissonance and chromaticism. Here “nuevo tango,” with its incorporation of jazz, contemporary classical music, extended harmonies, dissonances, and use of counterpoint, is realized to an extreme.