

THE BASS IN LATIN AMERICA

Tango Argentino

BY MARLON BISHOP



Pablo Aslan, whose 2010 Grammy-nominated CD *Tango Grill* is available on Zoho Records

FRAN KAUFMAN

TAKE A SECOND AND IMAGINE A WORLD without drummers. You, bassist, are a one-man rhythm section for your band. And to make things even stranger, you're playing an upright. With a bow.

That world is called Argentina, and the music you're playing is called tango.

First off, forget the stereotypes.

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Hollywood has long propagated an image of tango that boils down to Antonio Banderas with a rose in his mouth, but the real Argentinean tango is deep, hard-hitting stuff. It took shape in Buenos Aires in the 1920s—as jazz was developing in the United States—and evolved into one of the great music traditions of the 20th century. Underneath it all, there is a powerful bass sound that forces us to rethink *arco* playing. (Electric players: While there isn't a bass guitar tradition in tango, there's plenty here to learn from.)

Luckily for us, authentic tango is becoming more and more familiar to

American audiences, thanks to a growing vogue for tango dance, and the perennial cool of modern tango composer Astor Piazzolla. Bassist Pablo Aslan is one of the people leading the revival. For over 25 years, he's led successful tango groups in the U.S., including the New York Tango Trio and tango-jazz outfit Avantango. Aslan was drawn to tango because, as both a classical and jazz player, it meant he got to drive the rhythm while playing with a bow. "Bass is the heartbeat of the music," he says. "I have that power playing bass in a tango band—to double the time, change the direction

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- The old-school *orquesta típica* sound of tango master Osvaldo Pugliese.
- Pablo Aslan demonstrates "La Cumparsita" (Ex. 5).
- Hear audio examples of these exercises.

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WOODSHED TANGO ARGENTINO

Ex. 1

♩ = 100

Chords: Dm, A7, Dm

Fingerings: /5 2 3 /3, 2 5 2 4, /5 1 2 4, /5 5 3 5

Ex. 2

♩ = 100

Fingerings: 4 4 4 4, 4 4 4 4

Ex. 3

♩ = 120

Chords: C, G7

Fingerings: 3 4 5, 3 4 5, 0 4 5, 0 4 5

Ex. 4

Bow ricochet

L.H. slaps fingerboard

Ex. 5

♩ = 110

Chords: D7, Gm, Cm

Fingerings: 3 4 5 3 1, 0 2 7 2, 3 4 5 6 5 5 4 5 5, 3 4 5 6 7 8 7 0, 5 5 4 3 2 1, 0 5 5 2 4, 3 4 5 (5) 7 7 1 2 3 4, 5 7 8 7, 10, 3 3 5 5, 1 2 3 3 5 5 0 1 2 3 4, 5 5 5 0 5 3 / 2, 0 5 3 0 2, (0)(0)(0) 5 4, 5 5 5

of the music, or change the tempo.”

As Aslan explains, the tango ensemble, or *orquesta típica*, is made up of several violins, piano, double bass, and up to five accordion-like *bandoneones*, but smaller trios and quintets are common, as well. Whatever the format, the meat of tango bass playing is the *marcato* rhythm (Ex. 1), what Pablo calls “tango’s walking bass.” As in jazz, the bass outlines the harmonic movement with four steady, driving quarter-notes. It’s always performed with down-bows, and usually doubled in the piano’s left hand. The player alternates *marcato* passages with a few bars of *síncopa* (Ex. 2), a syncopated rhythm that interrupts the four-on-the-floor feel. The flow between *marcato* and *síncopa* playing in the bass defines the rhythmic shape of tango songs. A third rhythm, *milonga* (Ex. 3),

is used for faster-tempo pieces.

Simple enough, but the real character (and challenge) of tango bass is in its special approach to articulation. Aslan recalls listening back to his playing at his first-ever tango recording session and having a revelation. “I realized if I just played the notes on the page, it wasn’t going to happen,” he says. “I was supposed to do all this other dirty stuff.”

The first element of that “dirty stuff” is the fierce, off-the-string downstroke of *marcato* playing. The tango stroke is heavily accented, and played with just a tiny touch of the bow, which is treated to a heavy coat of resin. The note’s sustain comes from the left hand, which continues to hold the string after the bow leaves it. Aslan describes the technique as “plucking with the bow.”

The ultimate tango trick, however, is the *arrastre*. Coming from the Spanish for the verb “to drag,” it’s a way of dramatically swelling into the downbeat, and it’s performed on all of the tango-orchestra instruments in one way or another. On the bass, it means starting the bow before the beat, crescendoing rapidly, and finally snapping the wrist to accent the note on the beat. Often, the stroke is accompanied by a slide or chromatic run in the left hand. The hard part is learning to start a down-bow without an attack, and getting the *arrastre* right takes time for most players. In the transcriptions below, it’s indicated with the “>” symbol.

With no drums present in the tango ensemble, all the instruments become percussion instruments. Tango players abuse their basses with periodic smacks on the back and muted rim shots with the bow. One of the most common effects is called the *effecto cayengue* (Ex. 4): As the music gets more and more intense, the bassist swings the bow against the strings, causing it to ricochet, then instantly slaps the upper fingerboard with the left hand. “That’s why the real classical players won’t play tango,” jokes Aslan. “You can’t care what happens to your instrument.”

To hear all of these rhythms and techniques together in a single tango bass line, check out Ex. 5. It’s a transcription of Pablo Aslan improvising a part to go under “La Cumparsita,” the most famous tango song of all, composed by Gerardo Matos Rodríguez in 1917. That should keep your fingers occupied until next time, when we dig into 5-string *merengue* grooves, slapping *bachata*, and the surprising bass pyrotechnics of the Dominican Republic. **BP**