

THE BANDONEÓN

By Eduardo Lazarowski

“Each 11 of July is celebrated as the National Day of the Bandoneón as homage to the birthday of Aníbal Troilo” ...

Thus read a headline on a major Argentine newspaper on July 2014. Neither Troilo’s name nor the instrument that contributed to his rising as one of the greatest personalities in tango history are foreign words to tango dancers around the world. But not many tango lovers know the history of the “tango wind box”. So, let’s examine the major technical and historic features of the instrument considered the “soul” of tango music.

The bandoneón was invented to substitute the otherwise expensive and not always available church organs in rural communities of north Germany around

1835. Technically, the bandoneón is a portable wind instrument that belongs to the subgroup of “aero-phones” together with the accordion and the concertina, and it is played by depressing a series of buttons (keys) capriciously distributed on the surface of its two side panels. Opening and closing the blower produce the vibration of metal wedges. Professional tango musicians use the so-called achromatic bandoneón, which produce different notes (by the same key) during the opening and closing of the instrument. A standard modern bandoneón has 71 keys (38 and 33 on the right and left panels, respectively), generating 142 voices.



Maestro Julian Hasse performing in Durham NC

The bandoneón owes its name to its inventor, Heinrich Band and the cooperative (Union) created to financially support its manufacturing. Thus, when the instrument arrived to Buenos Aires, it was phonetically called by its trade-mark label “Band-Union” and the voice soon mutated from bandunión to bandoneón. How the first bandoneón made its way to Buenos Aires is not known with certainty, but one credible hypothesis is that German sailors introduced it to the Argentine main port around 1860.

A relatively well-accepted story tells us that José Santa Cruz, a slave descendant and skilled accordion player, acquired a primitive 32-key bandoneón, the first to arrive to Buenos Aires, from a German sailor. Soon after, Cruz was drafted by the army and sent to the front line during the ill-fated war against Paraguay (1865-70). José survived those years playing polkas, mazurkas, habaneras, and marching tunes on his bandoneón, thus entertaining the demoralized Argentine troops. Against the odds, he was one of the few black soldiers that made it back to Buenos Aires as war ended. His son Domingo was born in 1884 and learned to play the bandoneón at an early age. Later, Domingo paired with his younger brother Juan Carlos, a pianist, to play together the new music of the street, the nascent tango. By the end of the XIX Century Domingo Santa Cruz was a recognized bandoneonist, who had even opened an academy to teach the technique of

playing the bandoneón. The Santa Cruz brothers teamed up with other young musicians to form trios and quartets that spread the tango in bars and cafes of poor suburban neighborhoods (the *arrabales*), and later in salons and theaters of the city.

Domingo Santa Cruz is also remembered for his tango “Union Cívica”, composed in 1905 and dedicated to a local leader of the disarraying old Union Cívica Nacional party. In 1916, when the newly named Union Cívica Radical party led by Hypólito Yrigoyen won the presidential election, Yrigoyen supporters adopted the tango “Union Cívica” as party anthem. “Union Cívica” became a popular tango at the dance floor thanks to the version recorded by Rodolfo Biagi in 1939.

Following Domingo Santa Cruz’s foot steps, several bandoneón players gained popularity at the beginning of the XX Century. An incomplete list of these pioneering musicians includes Juan Maglio (“Pacho”), Augusto Berto, Vicente Loduca, José Severino, Genaro Espósito, Arturo Berstein, and Vicente Greco. However, with the exception of Berstein, who had received formal music instruction, most bandoneonists of the 1900’s played intuitively, “by the ear”. Because they were not digitally fluent on the keypads, the bandoneón sound was dominated by the bursts produced at the closing of the blower, with rapid digital flute-like whistles in staccato tempo interposed during the opening of the box.

Unlike the piano, guitar, flute, and violin for which learning methods were available, no written method existed for the bandoneón. Learning how to play this instrument was a formidable challenge. The bandoneón player is a “blind” musician because he cannot see the 71 keys distributed along eight or nine rows at the sides of the instrument. In addition, the musician needs to coordinate the digitalization on the keypads with the opening and closing of the blower. When the piano became the dominant rhythmic voice of the *Orquesta Típica* (circa 1910), bandoneonists struggled to catch up with the colorful new style. The bandoneón voice became slower, lazy, and dragged. Around 1910, Vicente Greco introduced the “ligados” (linking the notes played on the right keypad, as opposed to the short strikes of the staccatos), thus imprinting a slower, more melodic voice to the instrument.

However, a fundamental factor contributing to the evolution of tango music was the new interpretative style in the execution of the bandoneón that took place around 1920. Eduardo Arolas, “El Tigre del Bandoneón” (The Tiger of the Bandoneón), with his romantic and at times dramatic style, proposed a more melodic role for the *fueye* (*fueye*, Argentinian voice for blower) signaling a transition towards the modern bandoneón school. He also composed beautiful tangos that remain young and vibrant nowadays. But, like his fellow musicians of the Old Guard, Arolas did not dominate the execution technique needed to lift the bandoneón to its current role in tango orchestras. This task was reserved for the New Guard generation of bandoneón players.

Pedro Maffia was the most salient expression of this group. Pedro Laurenz, Luis Petrucelli, Ciriaco Ortiz, Minotto De Cicco, and Carlos Marcucci also made enormous contributions to the new bandoneón school.

At the age of 12, Pedro Maffia accompanied his father to a Buenos Aires downtown café

where famous bandoneón player Juan “Pacho” Maglio was performing. So much was Pedro impressed by Pacho’s bandoneón, a novel instrument to his eyes, that he became obsessed with learning how to play it. He took initial lessons from a neighbor, a self-proclaimed bandoneonist that hardly knew the basics. After a week into bandoneón lessons, the improvised teacher gave up; the young student had overcome the rudimentary music knowledge of the good neighbor. Losing his instructor did not discourage Pedro from continuing making progress on the bandoneón. By adopting old piano exercises that he had learned at the conservatory, Maffia developed a method for studying the *fueye*. Soon he attained such a digital domain of the instrument that a short age he began creating harmonies that would become the foundation of the modern bandoneón school.

A turning point in the evolution of the role of the bandoneón within tango orchestras was the pairing of Pedro Maffia and Pedro Laurenz –the “Great Pedros”, as first and second bandoneonists, respectively, of the Julio De Caro’s Sextet in 1925. Maffia and Laurenz had contrasting personalities and styles. But they understood and complemented each other to the point that they formed the best bandoneón duet of tango history; an orchestra inside the orchestra. Maffia and Laurenz played together within the De Caro Sextet for a brief period (Maffia formed his own orchestra in 1926 and Laurenz did so in 1933), but they maintained a close friendship and continued collaborating as musicians and composers for the rest of their lives. Both Pedros also were a source of inspiration to younger musicians that would become icons during the Golden Forties. The most salient follower of Maffia and Laurenz was Aníbal Troilo (“Pichuco”), for whom the “Day of The Bandoneón” is celebrated every 11th of July. Pichuco, in turn, was the inspiring genius for another genius, Astor Piazzolla, as we shall see in the pages below.

Anibal Troilo “Pichuco”, also known as “El Gordo” (the fat man), was an icon of the greatest period of tango music and his name remains a symbol of both Tango and Buenos Aires. Troilo was a great bandoneón player, conductor, and composer. He inspired and continues inspiring generations of tango musicians around the world.

Pichuco was born in 1914 in the porteño district of Almagro, close to El Abasto market, the neighborhood that witnessed the rise and glory of Carlos Gardel. Thus, Pichuco’s childhood was marked by tango. As most kids, Pichuco loved playing futbol (futbol, deformation of the word football, i.e. soccer). Running after a loose ball during a street game was precisely how he ended up next to a group of tango musicians, who were entertaining the public during a neighborhood outdoor party. The impact of seeing the bandoneón up close was so strong that, that night, he started “practicing” the instrument with ... a pillow!!! Soon after, his mother (his dad had just passed) purchased a real bandoneón and encouraged the boy to take music lessons. Pichuco was very intuitive and had a gifted musical ear. At 11, after six months studying the bandoneón with Juan Amendolaro, he had outplayed his teacher. After a few more private lessons, this time with none other than the great Pedro Maffia, Pichuco had acquired a vast domain of the instrument technique; he was ready for the big challenge.

Pichuco began playing the bandoneón, professionally, in nearby theaters during the screening of silent movies. His career spanned from his debut in an “orquesta de señoritas” (orchestra of young ladies) in 1927, to accompanying Juan “Pacho” Maglio in

1929. During these and following years, anticipating the glorious times in tango history known as the Decade of the Forties, Pichuco played with other rising stars, such as Elvino Vardaro, Osvaldo Pugliese, Alfredo Gobbi, and Orlando Goñi. He was recruited by Julio De Caro during a grand orchestra presentation series in 1932. Under the conduction of maestro De Caro, Pichuco played the bandoneón next to Pedro Laurenz, who also had an important influence on Pichuco's style.

Having accompanied Pedro Laurenz and studied with Pedro Maffia could have fulfilled the greatest expectation of any young bandoneón player of those times. Pichuco had more than such a luxury in his curriculum – he scored a “bonus goal” when he was recruited as accompanying bandoneón by Ciriaco Ortiz.

When in 1937, at the age of 22, Pichuco formed his own orchestra to debut at Café Marabú in downtown Buenos Aires; he was a mature musician who had absorbed the best from the best masters of his time. He symbolized in one person the technicality of Pedro Maffia, the energy of Pedro Lauernz, and the digital fluidity of Ciriaco Ortiz. Inside Pichuco's bandoneón hid the soul of these three “monsters of the *fueye*”. As a conductor, Pichuco was influenced by Julio De Caro's style, a style that he helped to expand to new frontiers. Pichuco's 38 year-long career in front of his orchestra was only ended when he died in 1975.

Describing the role of Aníbal Troilo as a bandoneón player is not a simple task. Nothing that we could say about the miracle of his bandoneón's sound would be enough to explain the feeling inspired by Troilo's tender and unique execution of the instrument. Just listen to his solos in his orchestras recordings such as *La Maleva* or *El Marne*, to name a few, or the many beauties with his quartet (with Roberto Grella on the guitar) to feel a magical joy in the heart. It is no wonder he was called “The Greatest Bandoneón of Buenos Aires”.

This article about the bandoneón could not be complete without mentioning another great bandoneonist, composer, and conductor, who was born in the Atlantic coastal city of Mar del Plata, south of Buenos Aires, and grew up in New York. Back in Buenos Aires as a teenager, the still unknown musician spent entire nights at café Marabú, admiring Troilo's performances. When on one night of 1939, a bandoneonist of Troilo's orchestra called in sick our young musician offered his service as a substitute. Troilo was skeptical, but after auditioning the young man, he accepted to include him in his orchestra –just for that night. The new bandoneonist performed brightly and was so well received by the audience that Troilo offered him a fixed post within his group; they became life-long friends and collaborators. Astor Piazzolla, thus the name of the Mar del Plata-born musician, spent five years as a member of the Troilo group. Eventually, he initiated a career as conductor of his own orchestra, taking tango music to new boundaries. Astor Piazzolla fused tango with erudite chamber music and jazz. His New Tango favored the music over the dance and, while resisted by traditionalists, conquered new audiences worldwide. Piazzolla's popularity together with the success of “Tango Argentino” and other majestically choreographed presentations of tango dance companies in Europe, Japan, and the U.S. contributed greatly to the rebirth of tango traditions and opened the door to the return of tango as a social dance in the 1990s ... But this is another story.