

## **Innovations in Sérgio Assad's solo guitar arrangements of *Verano* and *Invierno Porteño* by Ástor Piazzolla<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

Brazilian guitarist Sérgio Assad (b.1952) is widely recognized for his work as a member of the acclaimed Assad Duo, with his brother Odair. He is also known for his productivity as arranger, improviser and composer and for his experience with Latin American popular styles. This study examines Assad's solo guitar arrangements of *Verano* and *Invierno* from *Las Estaciones Porteñas* by Ástor Piazzolla, and compares them with the CD recording entitled *The Vienna Concert* by Piazzolla's Quintet, which was Assad's source. Other comparisons are made with versions of the *Estaciones* by Uruguayan guitarists Agustín Carlevaro and Baltazar Benítez. The author employs theories of hybridism and bi-musicality to frame his analysis and situates the works in terms of historical practices of guitar arranging. The conclusion points out Assad's innovations in texture and polyphonic writing for the solo guitar.

Keywords: Guitar arranging, bi-musicality, hybridism, Sérgio Assad, Piazzolla.

### **Introduction**

Brazilian guitarist Sérgio Assad (b.1952) is widely recognized for his work as a member of the acclaimed Assad Duo, with his brother Odair. He is also known for his productivity as arranger, improviser and composer and for his experience with Latin American popular styles, besides the classical guitar tradition. Sérgio Assad grew up playing *Choro* and other Brazilian popular styles, as part of a family

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practice, and also studied formally with a pupil of Andrés Segóvia, Monina Távora, who trained and exposed him and his brother to the classical guitar technique and repertoire. As a composer and arranger, Assad also sought formal composition training and was deeply influenced by the French impressionists, American jazz and also by Villa-Lobos, Antônio Carlos Jobim, Piazzolla and Ginastera, among others.

In this context, Assad's compositions and arrangements can be seen as a hybrid of formal and informal traditions (Bogdanovic, 1996) and as a result of the guitarist's bi-musicality (Hood, 1959). The importance of hybridism for this study lies in the fact that it can be connected to innovation, as anthropologist Homer G. Barnett endorses: "When Innovation takes place, there is an intimate linkage or fusion of two or more elements that have not been joined in just this fashion." (Barnett, 1953:181)

In addition, Assad's work can be included in a historical tradition. Guitarists have been arranging music from other media to their instruments since the origins of the instrument, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with intabulations of polyphonic vocal music for the vihuela. Since then, examples of this tradition present different types of texture, such as the early polyphonic writing we find in Luis de Narváez (*Canción del Emperador*, an arrangement of *Mille Regrets* by Josquin Desprez), or the homophony of Mauro Giuliani (e.g. *Rossiniane*). The harmonization, orchestration and exploration of timbre of Miguel Llobet (e.g. *Catalan folk songs*), and the reharmonization and recomposition observed in Léo Brouwer's adaptations (e.g. *Canción de Cuña*) are examples of practices that are closer in style to Assad's arrangements. A common thread in the examples above is that, despite being adaptations of works from other mediums, they appear to be originally written for the guitar. Assad, while maintaining this quality in his arranging, sets a new standard in polyphonic writing for the instrument, maybe due to his experience in writing for the duo. It is often said that he writes for two guitars in one. According to Assad:

A great part of my efforts as a composer are focused on creating arrangements and original pieces for the guitar duo with my brother Odair. However, writing for solo guitar has been a great pleasure for me, that is enriched by the challenge of exploring the full polyphonic capabilities of the guitar.

(Assad, 2005: 2)

As this study will illustrate, the innovations present in Assad's arrangements of Piazzolla's *Verano* and *Invierno Porteño* are connected to the hybridism of his background and are better demonstrated in the light of the tradition of guitar arranging and also by comparison with versions of the *Estaciones* by Uruguayan guitarists Agustín Carlevaro, Baltazar Benítez, and with the CD recording "The Vienna Concert" by Piazzolla's Quintet.

### Verano Porteño

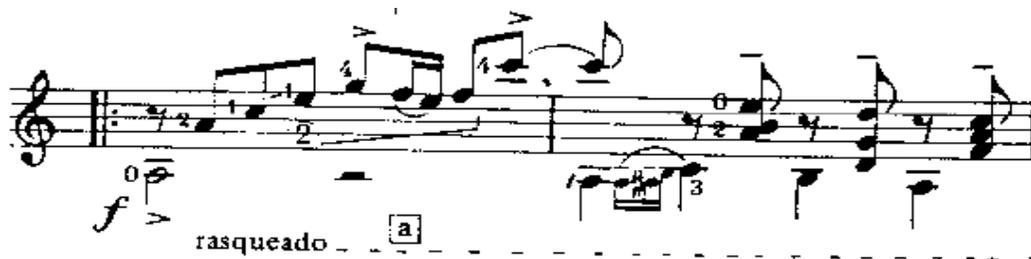
In Assad's *Verano Porteño*, the main innovation is the constant moving (walking bass) line, emulated from the recording and absent from other versions. (See examples 1, 2 and 3)

The image displays two musical examples. The first example, titled "Assad's Bass Line", shows a guitar part in treble clef and a bass part in bass clef. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 96. The guitar part features three triplet markings over the first three measures. The bass part shows a continuous walking bass line. The second example shows a guitar part (Gtr.) and a bass part (Cb.) starting at measure 4. The guitar part has a measure rest at measure 4, while the bass part continues with a triplet in the first measure and a measure rest thereafter.

Example 1: Verano Porteño arranged by Assad, walking bass line.



Example 2: *Verano Porteño* arranged by Agustín Carlevaro



Example 3: *Verano Porteño* arranged by Baltazar Benítez.

One of the most striking features of the arrangement is the final section in C minor, also absent in the Benítez and Carlevaro's Versions, where Assad recreates the apotheosis of Piazzolla's Quintet (last 45 seconds in the recording) by the constant motion in glissandi between C and G, on the sixth string, *rasgueados*, and the theme simultaneously, concluding with percussion and the final statement of the theme. The incredible effect of this section is both auditory and visual, since the left hand is rapidly moving up and down the fingerboard in order to realize the texture, resulting in the climax of the arrangement (see Example 4).

Percussion  
R.H. (右手) -----  
A B C D  
(on the top)  
※ 表面板をたたく

(右手) (左手)  
R.H. R.H. L.H. R. L. R. L. R. R. R.  
(on the neck)  
指板をたたく

(押弦をずらし、音程を上げる)  
bend  
ff

Example 4: *Verano Porteño* arranged by Assad, finale.

The recording by Piazzolla's quintet lasts 6 minutes and 47 seconds, while Assad's version lasts about 4 minutes. Obviously, there is a number of repetitions and even modulations that are not present in the arrangement. However, Assad captures the essence of the work and includes more details than any of the previous attempts. His approach in this arrangement has many elements that are simplified and recomposed, although his choice for the conclusion emulates Piazzolla's performance quite thoroughly. The comparisons shown here are not intended to diminish Carlevaro's and Benítez's excellent arrangements but to demonstrate Assad's ingenuity in creating polyphonic textures that are closer to the source and to the style, and that circumvent the limitations of the guitar.

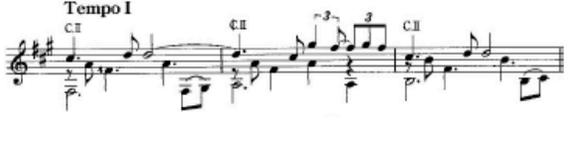
### ***Invierno Porteño***

In *Verano Porteño*, Assad chooses to reduce the repetitions of sections and omits structural details, such as modulations and improvisations that are interesting in a quintet format but would make a solo guitar arrangement drag in lack of excitement. On the other hand, in *Invierno Porteño*, the form is very clear, with great variety of texture, *tempi*, keys and mood between sections. This variety of contrasting sections is found in most of Piazzolla's works (e.g. *Tango Suite*, for two guitars or *La Historia del Tango*, for flute and guitar) and enables Assad to reproduce the form of the performance by the quintet the piece almost identically, without sounding uninteresting. Assad's arrangement is particularly successful in part because of the variety that he brings to the guitar, by following the textures and keys of the original performance. The keys of F# minor, G minor, C minor and Eb major aren't frequently seen in the repertory. A chart comparing these different textures and keys is shown in Example 5. It is interesting that Assad also suggests a different register for the main melodic instrument, choosing the high register for the *bandoneón* and piano (see textures 1, 2 and 6 in Example 5); the mid register for the violin (textures 3 and 4 in Example 5) and the highest for the *bandoneón* and violin together (texture 5 in example 5). Carlevaro's version is transposed to A minor and is simpler in terms of texture and contrast (see Example 6).

Piazzolla concludes his piece with a *passacaglia*-like section based on variations on a harmony that is very similar to the famous canon by Pachelbel, which features a harmonic sequence that is often found in many contemporary popular songs and is used by the melodic instruments for variations. Assad makes this section shorter by reducing the number of repetitions but transcribes some of the more remarkable lines by the *bandoneón* (first measures of Example 7) and electric guitar (in squares in Example 7) and concludes the piece with the harmonics that suggest the final *pizzicato* section. The final cadence done by the piano is transcribed almost literally (circled in Example 7).

The arrangements of *Verano* and *Invierno Porteño* are fine examples of adaptations that are made possible by Assad's skills as a composer, which come from his solid knowledge of counterpoint and composition, an incredible familiarity with fretboard harmony and a deep understanding of the rhythmic, harmonic and improvisational practices that come from his experience with popular styles, which seem to be the guiding force in his process of choosing the most important events to include and what to omit from his arrangements. Interestingly, Assad (who is a Brazilian), presents arrangements that are closer to Piazzolla's style than the two compared arrangers from the *Rio de la Plata* region, from where the composer is also a native. According to Roland Dyens, another skilled arranger himself:

One of the best arrangements ever made, in my opinion, is *Las 4 Estaciones of Piazzolla* by Sérgio Assad. Just perfect. A great arrangement (for solo guitar) should speak about music only. Then make the guitar stay "behind" somehow, at its service. Not hidden. Just discretely behind (Dyens in Vincens, 2009: 40)

1		theme played by <i>bandoneón</i> walking bass F# minor
2		theme played by piano long notes on bass accompaniment by arpeggiation in mid register F# minor
3		theme played on violin (mid register) repetitive (static) bass accompaniment on top G minor
4		theme played on violin (mid register) habanera rhythm on bass accompaniment on top in deciso character A minor
5		theme played by bandoneón and violin habanera rhythm on bass staccato accompaniment in mid register C minor
6		theme played by bandoneón with ornamentation ornamented walking bass line A minor

Example 5: Main theme of *Invierno Porteño* in different textures by Assad.

**Invierno Porteño**

Musik: Astor Piazzolla  
Bearbeitung für Gitarre: Agustin E. Carlevaro

*Lento y dramático*



Example 6: *Invierno Porteño* by Carlevaro.

The image shows a musical score for the piece 'Invierno Porteño' by Assad, arranged for guitar. The score is written in a single system with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It features several measures of music with various performance instructions and technical markings. The score is divided into three main sections, each enclosed in a box. The first section is labeled 'Tempo I' and 'C.III'. The second section is labeled 'C.III' and 'C.I'. The third section is labeled 'C.III' and 'C.I'. The score includes various performance instructions such as 'più mosso', 'rall. poco a poco', 'harm. gva', 'loco', 'l.v.', and 'molto rit.'. The score also includes various technical markings such as '3', '4', '2', '1', '0', '5', '6', and '7'.

Example 7: *Invierno Porteño* arranged by Assad, finale.

There are many examples in the two arrangements that are described extensively in my dissertation entitled “The Arrangements of Roland Dyens and Sérgio Assad: Innovations in Adapting Jazz Standards and Jazz-Influenced Popular Works to the Solo Classical Guitar” (Vincens, 2009: 40)

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### **Recordings**

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### **Author's biography**

Brazilian guitarist Guilherme Vincens, DMA, has performed extensively in Latin America, Spain, the United States and Brazil. He has received over 12 awards in national and international competitions including the 1st Prize in the XI Portland International Guitar Competition. Guilherme studied at the University of Arizona with Prof. Thomas Patterson and guest-artist David Russell, under a CAPES/Fulbright scholarship.