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Taking a 'Poor Man's Church Organ' to Heavenly Heights

By **ALLAN KOZINN**

“Well, I was originally a drummer,” J. P. Jofre, the 29-year old master of the bandoneón, said one recent afternoon when a visitor to his Harlem apartment asked whether he came to the accordionlike object he was holding by way of another instrument. Drumming, it turned out, was only the beginning of the musical path of this prolific composer, who moved to New York from Argentina five years ago.

At the Escuela de Música in San Juan, Argentina, a small town near the Chilean border, he also studied the double bass, bassoon, vibraphone, voice and piano. But everything changed when he was 17, and an uncle played him a recording by [Astor Piazzolla](#), the great Argentine bandoneónist and composer.

“I said: ‘Whoa! This is amazing,’ ” Mr. Jofre said. “Piazzolla’s music was classical, and it was tango, and it had the power of heavy metal. It was a lot of things mixed together. I knew immediately that this was what I really wanted to do.”

Mr. Jofre, whose full name is Juan Pablo Jofre Romarion, has just released his first CD, “Hard Tango” (Round Star), which includes several of his own classical-tango hybrids, as well as works by Piazzolla, Leo Brouwer and Fernando Otero, and a handful of arrangements, among them a quirky, sharp-edged arrangement of John Lennon’s “I Am the Walrus.” He will be performing some of these pieces and offering a

preview of new works that he plans to record in a few months, at [Joe's Pub](#) on Wednesday evening.

He has built a following that includes some influential supporters. Mr. Otero, whose “Abundancia” is included on Mr. Jofre’s CD, will be among the performers at Joe’s Pub. The jazz reed player [Paquito D’Rivera](#), who plays clarinet on the recording, invited Mr. Jofre to perform as a guest with his ensemble Panamericana and said he would probably sit in at Joe’s Pub, too.

“He’s a very creative composer,” Mr. D’Rivera said. “He’s trying to do something different by learning from musicians who play in different styles, and cross-pollinating those styles with tango. And I really like the instrument. I think the bandoneón is the most expressive instrument ever created.”

Though it looks and sounds like an accordion, the bandoneón is actually a member of the concertina family, brought to Argentina by German immigrants, Mr. Jofre said. He added that it was probably used, early on, as a poor man’s church organ — a point he illustrated during an interview by playing the opening of Bach’s D minor Toccata with a persuasively organlike tone.

Mr. Jofre remembers being surprised by the bandoneón’s complexity when he first tried to play one. The instrument has rows of buttons on each side of the bellows, and no keyboard. Each set of buttons produces a distinct timbre; moreover, the pitches differ depending on whether the instrument is being pulled opened or pushed closed.

“The first thing I did,” Mr. Jofre said, “was sit at the piano and figure out what note every button on the bandoneón played. It took me a week, and then as soon as I was finished, I found a book that explained it all.”

In search of a teacher, Mr. Jofre approached touring bandoneónists who came through San Juan for concerts. He usually had a lesson or two, and one player arranged for an introduction to [Daniel Binelli](#), who had played in Piazzolla's sextet for several years. Mr. Binelli encouraged him both as a bandoneónist and as a composer. ("He told me, 'This is your thing, you have to compose for the bandoneón,' " Mr. Jofre said.) He also gave him a letter of recommendation that led to studies in Buenos Aires — a 16-hour bus ride from San Juan that he took twice a month with [Julio Pane](#), another member of Piazzolla's band.

Mr. Jofre has taken Mr. Binelli's advice about composing for the bandoneón, and also a page from Bach's playbook, creating versions of his works for ensembles of all kinds as a way of ensuring performances. His "Milongon," for example, exists in versions for his [quintet](#), [jazz band](#) and [string orchestra](#). His biggest work so far, a bandoneón concerto, will have its premiere next March when he performs it with the Symphony Silicon Valley, in San Jose, Calif.

Like Piazzolla, he is interested in exploring tango as a classical form, a notion on which unanimity remains elusive, even in Argentina.

"There were two points of view among my teachers," Mr. Jofre said. "My music theory teacher didn't like tango at all, but my harmony and orchestration teacher used to say that tango was chamber music. For me, tango has to do with secrets, with beauty and mystery, and simplicity as well. But one of the main things is the bandoneón. Yes, you can have a tango without it. But it's the sound that gives the music its stamp."

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: June 27, 2013

An article on Monday about the musician J. P. Jofre misstated part of the name of the orchestra with which he will perform his bandoneón concerto next March and misstated

part of the name of the city in California where the orchestra is based. The orchestra is the Symphony Silicon Valley, not the Silicon Valley Philharmonic, and it is in San Jose, not in San Juan.