

What makes a good tango?

What makes a good tango from a dancer's perspective? Appreciation of any art form is a highly subjective process and I present my personal preferences as a 'tango dancer' and a 'musician who loves to play tango' working with the form and function of both tango dance and tango music.

A tango dancer's appreciation of music is a process complicated by a number of variable conditions, for instance, personal preference, the mood of the listener, a dancer's ability to be 'in the music' rather than 'in the body' and the context in which the music is delivered by the DJ and the sound system. I think we can all be quite fickle about musical appreciation - an intense tango one night can be but musical wallpaper on another.

We all hear and understand spoken communication in a different way. The same statement announced to a room of 50 people can be interpreted or *mis*interpreted 50 different ways. Einstein once said, "the problem with communication is the illusion that it has been understood". This illusion may be a weakness of the spoken word, but it is something to be celebrated in creative improvisation, like dancing. If 50 tango dancers listen to the same piece of music, there could be 50 different and varying creative interpretations and appreciations of the music.

I listen to tango music a lot and have a collection of over 4000 tracks of tango music. I guess that my current favourites make up a small percentage of these. Some tango composers were blessed with a gift that enabled them to write many superb songs, others, sadly, were one-hit-wonders. One reason my collection has grown so big is that I have bought albums by a composer on the strength of a tango that I really love, only to find most of his other work does not move me to the same degree.

It was tango music, not the dance that first grabbed my attention. How can a musical genre that includes pieces as rich and technically brilliant as a Beethoven sonata (*i.e. A Evaristo Carriego, Osvaldo Pugliese*) have remained widely uncelebrated? As I learnt to dance, (I was taught using the basic eight method) I can't remember really feeling in touch with the music. I suppose that my focus was 'in the body' not 'in the music' until I became competent enough to relax and start to listen to the music and use it as creative inspiration and contributing dynamic of the dance.

As I became more aware of the music as dancer, my curiosity homed in on why some tango songs really inspired me to dance and why others were so unintuitive and unappealing that I would want to stop dancing. So I started to collect tango music in search of an understanding of my 'perfect' tango.

Tango is the sound of diaspora, the music of displaced people from an incredible range of cultures and countries who found themselves in Buenos Aires at the start of the twentieth century. Travellers and opportunists, fortune-hunters and runaways, all carrying with them folklore melodies passed down through generations. Only the most robust, intuitive, memorable and resonant melodies could possibly survive this tortuous journey.

The tunes that emerged in the early years of tango are unique in the development of music. Remember this was a period before radio or television when folklore was a real and vibrant part of storytelling and entertainment. I can imagine myself as an early immigrant, arriving in Buenos Aires without a common language and unable to converse intellectually in any way except with music. Through music I could find a way of sharing my sense of self with other musicians and start to integrate. I could find a way to celebrate life (such as it is) and make a heartfelt cry of desperation that, after spending all my savings to get to a better life in Argentina, the reality of my new life is worse than the one I left behind. Like

other immigrant musicians, I would intuitively and unconsciously bring all my musical folklore memories to share at barrio gatherings. Destitute, cold, hungry, lonely and desperate, we would seek comfort and companionship in music. We would play by ear, each contributing the resonant songs from our homeland, learning from each other, giving and gaining new skills until, with one voice a new musical expression emerges. Tango was born.

As tango emerged and rapidly grew in popularity it didn't take long before entrepreneurs started to develop and market it to a wider audience. I have mixed feelings about the ensuing commercial exploitation. There would be some superbly crafted and highly popular tango music to follow as a result but I feel a special regard for these brief years of tango at its purest and unexploited form of art.

So what makes a good tango? For me, some of the factors can be attributed to the early conditions that helped create the genre.

Musical Communication

Sometimes I can hear a tango for a first time and know intuitively how the musical story will be told and where it will finish. As tango developed, musicians of different cultures and languages learnt to improvise musical storytelling. By making the music as intuitive as possible an ensemble could play together effectively. What worked intuitively for the musicians still works for dancers. Like an improvising musician, a dancer, especially a leader, needs to know where the music is going to be able to provide an effective lead. An example of this is using bass runs, like a jazz bass player. A bass run can link different parts of a tango providing a rhythmic and melodic bridge between sections. The first four descending notes of 'La Cumparsita' come to mind. Like any good story, a good tango will tell of many emotions, provide pauses and make contradictions through musical dialogues and rhythmic changes. The tango Por una cabeza (by a head) is a story about horse racing with a dramatic change from the lyrical opening theme to the confrontational second theme. This is the tango used in the film 'Scent of a woman' danced by Al Pacino and Gabrielle Anwar.

Al Compas del Corazon

Rhythm is central to a good tango. From the earliest tribal gatherings around the campfire to contemporary cinematic composers we have known how to influence emotion by using the beat of the heart as a rhythm. We all have an inner physical/emotional rhythm which defines us in ways we hardly expect and notice. When an external rhythm synchronises or syncopates with our inner rhythm it resonates and can move us profoundly. Listen to Miguel Calo's rendition of Al Compas del Corazon (The beat of the heart) performed with singer Raul Beron. The music literally plays with our heart-strings. But a good tango will offer more than a heartbeat rhythm. It will play with syncopation – a technique that utilises the space between each beat in half, quarter or even smaller interjections which offer dancers a rhythmic structure for corte and quebradas. Have you noticed the insistence of tango music. Sometimes I feel like an invisible hand is pulling me into the next move. This is *marcato*, a sound normally produced by the bandoneon that musically anticipates the start of the next compass or beat. Think about a jazz band preparing to play together – the band leader will count in saying "One, two, three, four **and**..." The "**and**" is *pulling* the band together into the first beat of their performance and follows the same technique as the bandoneon in a tango – a device which helps the dancers to mark the next beat clearly in their interpretation of the music. Osváldo Pugliese had a name for this technique and even named one of his tangos after it – "La Yumba" (*pronounced la sschuum-ba*). Next time you play this tango listen for the insistent calling of the bandoneon from beat to beat.

Playing in between the notes

I recall a radio interview with Joanna McGregor who played the music of Astor Piazzolla with two of the surviving members of Piazzolla's original quintet, guitarist Horacio Malvicino, and bass player Hector Console. She said that playing good tango was the feeling in between the notes. If she played the music as it was written did not sound authentic. She had the great good fortune to work with Malvicino and Console who could pass on to her the feeling of tango that is call **ritmo mugre** (*dirty rhythm*).

Earlier in this article I lamented the passing of the early years of tango and the rare circumstances that gathered so many musicians from different cultures in Buenos Aires at a time when people made their own entertainment. I guess that many of these musicians would have had a gypsy heritage and a long tradition of improvising from the heart with much gusto and feeling. I am awed with the virtuosity of some of the musicians I hear in tango music, more so when I think that they are playing between the notes and improvising as they play. These musical moments make my spirit soar. Listen to *A Los Amigos* by the Francini Pontier orchestra, especially the violin solo that starts about 60 seconds into the piece. For bandoneon virtuosity, listen to *Recuerdo* by Osvaldo Pugliese and his orchestra. There is a standing joke among bandoneon players about this incredibly difficult solo. When requested if they can play *Recuerdo* a bandoneonista replies "**Depues!**" (later)

If you would like to hear the musical references made in this article, don't forget that there is a music library available for dancers at any of our events or teaching night. If you are looking to expand your collection, I can recommend Mike Lavocah's online CD shop at <http://www.milonga.co.uk>. I also have a recording of the Joanna McGregor Piazzolla concert if you missed it.

I'll leave you with a heartfelt hug and hope that we will sometime share a tango.

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