

**Rhythm, Meter, and Dance of the Argentine Tango**  
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**INTRODUCTION**

**TANGO**....Just the word conjures up exciting images and inspires many associations and interpretations, such as passion, sensuality, drama, gender wars, even violent ones, a national identity, a by-gone era, a universal art form. While I am fascinated with the many dimensions of the music and the dance of the Argentine tango, I will limit my discussion to a more tangible perspective.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the elusive relationship between music and dance. I take the approach as a musician who also has a passion for dance. This is a preliminary study, aimed at sharing information about the two forms and demonstrating relationships between the rhythm and meter of the music with specific figures and steps of the dance. While this may seem like a surface relationship, one must always establish labels for elements to be compared on deeper levels. My hope is to lay the groundwork for an analytical study that may reveal a deeper connection between the dance and music of the Argentine tango, not only in terms of musical analysis but also metaphors for meaning.

**BACKGROUND (omitted from the presentation due to lack of time)**

Since this may be a new topic to many of you, I would first like to give a brief background of the dance and the music, and hopefully portray a glimpse into the culture of Argentina. (It has been said that Argentines are Italians who speak Spanish, think they are British, and wish they were French.)

Dance

The economic boom in Argentina at beginning of the last century attracted nearly as many immigrants seeking prosperity to this large, fertile country as to the U.S. While the *centro* of the capital, Buenos Aires, housed the rising middle and upper classes in the opulent city described as “the Paris of South America,” the outer neighborhoods housed the workers of the slaughterhouses and the newly-arrived immigrants. There in the *arrabales*, or the outermost slums of Buenos Aires, the *compraditos*, those unemployed young men—hoodlums really—and their prostitutes gave birth to the tango in their shady dance halls, cafes, and brothels.

While the etymology of the word *tango* has various interpretations, the word was used to describe African dances and places where Africans danced in the Rio de la Plata region of Argentina and Uruguay around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since it was already used in connection with dance, the word tango was easily associated with the new dance taking shape in the *arrabales* of Buenos Aires.

Most historians agree the predecessor of the tango was the Argentine *milonga*, an urbanized folk dance that incorporated elements of the Cuban *habanera*. The director of the Lunfardo Institute in Buenos Aires, José Gobello, has an interesting theory about how

tango started (*lunfardo* refers to colloquial Spanish spoken in Buenos Aires, which was often used in many tango lyrics). He maintains the new dance began with the influence of the African *candombe*, a bantu-African rhythm and dance, on the milonga.

*Compraditos*, who were in the habit of visiting African-Argentine dance halls in Buenos Aires, witnessed this wildly rhythmic and often improvised dance, and they created a parody of the movements within the context of the *milonga*. A key difference was that, while the Africans danced the *candombe* separately, the *compraditos* danced together. It seems the most novel movements were the *quebradas* (dramatically improvised, jerky, quasi-athletic movements) and the *cortes* (a sudden pause in the movement, more as a prelude to another series of *quebradas*) (Collier, 44-46)

This new Africanized dance born in the lower-class slums was called the *milonga-tango*, or *tango-milonga*. It moved toward the *centro* from its origins in the outer barrios, probably carried by high-class prostitutes and middle and upper-class *porteños*, citizens of Buenos Aires, who took to “slumming.” (Collier, 50) While the dance had a bad reputation from the outset, it soon provided an authentic, or *criollo* form, for the Argentine people. Even the new immigrants embraced it. The new tango was unacceptable to the high society of Buenos Aires, however, who frowned on such other lascivious dances as the mazurka and the habenera, Only when the dance became the rage in Paris and beyond in the early teens, albeit in a toned-down form, did the Argentine upper-class follow suit. By 1930s, while tango had become out of fashion in Paris, it was firmly established as *the* popular dance in every class socio-economic class in the capital of Argentina.

## Music

The music was born alongside the dance, as musicians tried to fit melody and rhythm to the dance movements. While the early origins of the music are mostly open to speculation, it seems certain the first tango musicians were untrained. They improvised their tunes first on flutes, violins, harps and then with the guitar, clarinet, and bandoneón—the German button accordion that became a permanent fixture in tango orchestras. Just as the dance has its African roots, so does the music. Some of the earliest tango musicians were African-Argentine, including one of the earliest composers of real tangos, Rosendo Mendizábal.

The earliest tangos written and published in the 1890s were mostly titled “tango criollo para piano,” and they more closely resemble milongas than later tangos. By 1910 the tango solidified as a distinct style and established a firm foothold in Buenos Aires and had begun to spread to other urban areas such as Montivideo in Uruguay. Through recordings and these published “tangos for piano,” the music became as popular as the dance in the cafes and dance halls.

The earliest tango ensembles were trios, usually bandoneón, flute, and guitar. As the groups played in cafes, the music was refined somewhat just for listening. The first real “stars” emerged around 1910, most notably the bandleaders Francisco Canaro (1884-1964) an Uruguayan violinist, Roberto Firpo (1884-1969), pianist, and Vicente Greco (1888-1924), bandoneonist. By 1911, when Columbia contracted Greco to record some tangos, he had expanded the basic trio to a sextet of two bandoneóns, two violins, piano, and flute, and named the group *orquesta típica criolla*, or creole traditional band. While the adjective *criolla* fell out of use, tango bands continued to be called *orquestas típicas*.

In the teens, the standard sextet was solidified into two bandoneóns, two violins, piano, and double-bass—a configuration begun by Canaro that lasted for the next 20 years. The rise of the *tango-cancion*, the tango song, by 1920 further marked an evolutionary stage of the tango as a popular song. While words had been fitted to earlier tangos, usually of a light-hearted nature, it was not until the *letras* of Pascual Contursi (1888-1932) that the tango lyrics evolved to the depth of their soul. Usually the lyrics bemoan the struggles of a poor immigrant, betrayal of a woman, lost love, and general fatalism. Many use *lunfardo*, the colloquial Spanish of Buenos Aires.

By the 1920s, the tango had gained acceptance on every level of Argentine society after its “gentrification” in Europe, and the country was at its most prosperous. Tango music was in high demand for both dancing and listening. People often went to the cinema just to hear their favorite musicians play tangos at the silent films. In this decade, tango musicians split into two schools, the “traditionalists” (such as Canaro and Firpo) who stressed rhythm to produce a tango suitable for dancing, and the “evolutionist” (such as de Caro, and Fresedo) who wanted to emphasize melody and harmony. The two schools also differed in number of musicians in their ensembles: the traditionalists often doubled the number of bandoneóns and violins and added other instruments, whereas the evolutionary bands maintained the classic sextet of two bandoneóns, two violins, piano, and bass.

The 1930s solidified the Golden Age of tango in Argentina. Some of the great tango musicians who emerged at the height of the Golden Age, include the great bandoneonist Aníbal Triolo (1914-1975), Carlos Di Sarli (1900–1960), Miguel Caló (1907-1972), Rodolfo Biagi (1906-1969), Pedro Laurenz (1902-1972) and Osvaldo

Pugliese (1905-1994). Traditionalist band leaders like Juan D'Arienzo brought the music back to its original function—for dancing—from its popularity as music for listening. The orchestras grew larger, and like the Big Bands in the US, soon needed arrangers. Consequently, the level of the players rose, as they needed to be able to read music and to be better trained in harmony and counterpoint. Singers were also integrated in the ensembles. And of course, the most famous of all tango singers was Carlos Gardel.

### **RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN the DANCE and the MUSIC**

The dance of the Argentine tango, is one of specific gender roles, and it conveys many levels of metaphor for the male-female relationship and archetypal male-female energy. In the physical manifestation of the tango, the man initiates the movement with the forward thrust of his energy, and the woman responds to this forward motion by shaping and molding the raw energy. The two are intertwined in a symbiotic partnership. The leader invites the follower to take a step (literally *la marca* – the mark). She responds in her own style and with her own energy—the leader does not drag the follower around the dance floor. Rather, there is an intimate conversation between the partners in the lead-follow dynamic.

The context for this conversation is, of course, the music. Most *tangueros* agree the dance springs from the music and that the music is at the heart of the dance. In other words, the music is more than a mere background necessity over which one executes dance steps. True *milongueros* and *milongueras*, as the men and women who frequent the *milongas*, or tango dances gatherings are called, listen intuitively to the music and seek to express it through their bodies. Listening to and feeling the music in the body is

crucial not only to dancing the tango well, but also to communicating with one's partner. When I danced with some of the older milongueros in Buenos Aires in January of 2001, I knew I was dancing with the soul of Argentina. The music was so completely in their ears and bodies, and so their dance was strong, secure, and clear. Since my Spanish is still very basic, I could only speak a little with these people. But I was able to connect on a level much deeper than words through a common sensitivity to the music.

The dramatic images most people associate with the tango are largely due to Hollywood and theater. Rudolf Valentino dancing the tango with a rose in his mouth is really a caricature of the dance. I am interested in the *popular* form of the dance as it relates to the music, not the show dance. I will be showing the social dance this morning, for which we use what is called *estilo milonguero*, or milonguero style. It is a close embrace, where the connection is body to body—usually through the solar plexus. The lead is given by the man's chest, not via hand signals. Both partners must stand upright with excellent posture in order to give and receive the body signals. In show tango, the frame is open, leaving room for more fancy figures and embellishments. Most people in BA dance close embrace style in the crowded milongas—that is how the souls connect.

The dance-music connection in Argentine tango is at once obvious and elusive. It exists on a number of levels, from the physical down to the emotional and even spiritual realms. In order to grapple with the deeper levels of connections between the music and dance, it is necessary to first identify the surface physical connections. In the following discussion, I seek to provide insights into the music of the Argentine tango by investigating the intricate relationship between the musical elements of rhythm and

meter, and the dance figures and steps. I believe without understanding the bodily motions of tango, a true understanding of the music is impossible.

Since the social Argentine tango is an improvised dance, the basic figures in the repertory do not fall into any real set patterns. Besides navigating space on the dance floor, rhythm is perhaps the most important element in the music that influences a leader's decisions regarding where to move next. I will first identify basic rhythmic and phrase patterns found in the music and then demonstrate how they are interpreted in the dance. As to the deeper levels of the dance-music connection I mentioned earlier, I will leave you to draw most of your own conclusions. This paper represents only the beginning of my research and ideas, and I have chosen five examples from the Golden Age era to demonstrate some of them.

## **ANALYSIS**

With a standard meter of 2/4, the Argentine tango is a walking dance. While they endeavor to walk like a cat, tango dancers need a driving pulse. In its basic form, the dance is walked on the quarter-note beat. A subdivided beat creates "quick-quick" steps. (See Example 1.) The first clip will first demonstrate these basic steps to music of Juan D'Arienzo (1900-1976). This orchestra leader and violinist, born to Italian immigrants, came to be known as the "King of Rhythm." Although he played jazz before committing himself completely to the tango, D'Arienzo was a traditionalist. His arrangements characteristically favor rhythm over melody or harmony. In this example, we will hear his orchestra play "La Cumparsita," (The Little Carnival Procession), written by the young Uruguayan Hernán Matos Rodríguez as a marching tune for his student federation

in 1917. It later became the most famous of all tangos. The music is given in Example 1b, with the underlying quarter notes and eighth notes written below the staff to show D'Arienzo's straight-forward rhythmic arrangement of the accompaniment.

There is no percussion section in the tango orchestra, but rhythmic patterns are heard in different instrumental layers of the texture. The bass line often carries the prominent dance rhythm, or perhaps it may be in an accompanying middle part such as the bandoneón or the string section. Some typical accompaniment rhythms are shown in Examples 2a, where further subdivision of the beat into sixteenth notes creates room for embellishments for the follower. In these moments, she may find time in between the main beats and steps to play with her feet with taps or other adornments. Example 2b shows some typical syncopated rhythms. The second especially makes room for the man to lead a syncopated walk. (Some *porteños* call this the *caminata renga*, which literally means a hobbled walk.) We will demonstrate both the embellishments within the main beat/step and the syncopated walk inspired by "Verdemar" a tango by Carlos Di Sarli (1900-1960) and played by his orchestra. Here Di Sarli uses one of his favorite instrumental textures, where the violin section takes on a rhythmic countermelody to the longer sustained melody played first by the bandoneón, then later sung by the voice. Another big composer, pianist, and orchestra leader of the Golden Age, Di Sarli was born to Italian immigrants parents like D'Arienzo. He formed his first ensemble in 1919 and rose to importance in the mid '20s with his first sextet in 1925. As you will hear, his sound is completely different from D'Arienzo. Di Sarli found a way to emphasize melody while still driving the rhythm for the dancers. Piano and strings predominant in his romantic and lush arrangements. I often think of him as the Mahler of tango. The

melody of the first sixteen bars is transcribed in Example 2c, along with the rhythmic patterns in the string accompaniment written below the staff.

The *tango-vals* is another related dance to the tango, but, as the name suggests, it is in triple meter. While tempos may vary, the *vals* tends to be a faster dance than the tango. In its simplest form, the *vals* is usually stepped to the dotted half note, so that the dancers only mark the downbeat of each measure. However, there is a characteristic syncopation in the rhythmic style, where the second beat of each measure is stressed. Example 3a illustrates both patterns. Often two-bar groups follow the pattern of dotted half and quarter-half, and the woman will do her cross step on the syncopation. The next clip will demonstrate the straight dotted-eighth note step and the syncopated step of the *vals* to Francisco Canaro's orchestra playing "Desde el Alma" (Musica de Rosita Melo y Victor Piuma Velez y Letra de Homero Manzi). Canaro's version of this *vals* is especially interesting and unusual with the addition of wind instruments in the counter-melody of the penultimate verse. A transcription of the first sixteen bars is given in Example 3b. Notice how the melody itself accents the second beat on m. 9.

While the rhythmic pattern of dotted-eighth and sixteenth note followed by a pair of eighth notes is commonly associated with tango, it is really a stereotype of the music. As the first two examples show, this pattern is not always present in the Argentine tango. It in fact comes from the Cuban *habanera*. In the Argentine music I am discussing today, this rhythm is most characteristic of the *milonga*, the faster folk dance I mentioned earlier that is a predecessor to the tango. In fact, it was often called the *tango-milonga*. Example 4a illustrates the characteristic rhythm, first in its basic pattern followed by a more syncopated version. The next clip will demonstrate the dance to the music of

Rodolfo Biagi (1906-1969), a pianist, composer, and director who started playing with D'Arienzo in 1935. He later formed his own orchestra, which, like D'Arienzo emphasized rhythm, but in a more refined way. Here is Biagi's milonga "Flor de Monserrat." Example 4b gives a transcription of the opening bars of this milonga, with the bass line in the characteristic milonga rhythm. As we demonstrate this faster dance, you will see a characteristic side-step called the *traspie*, which expresses the dotted and syncopated rhythms .

For my last example, I would like to discuss another issue of musical time in the tango—that of phrase structure and phrase rhythm. Typically, phrases fall into eight-bar groups, subdivided into four plus four, and the previous examples clearly illustrate this type of construction. Dancers who are sensitive to the music hear the cadences and pace themselves to close their improvised series of figures and steps at the end of phrase. One interesting exception to the typical eight-bar structure occurs in "Vieja Amiga," a *tango-cancion* by the bandoneonist and composer Pedro Laurenz (1902-1972) with words by the famous tango lyricist Pascual Contursi (1888-1932). This tango opens with a two-part phrase, each part beginning with a half-note that extends the phrase to ten bars, divided into five plus five. After this opening, however, the contrasting phrases fall into the more regular eight-bar groups. I will close my presentation by demonstrating how a sensitive *milonguero* could shape the longer gestures of the dance to the phrase structure of the music. The music is given in Example 5, with the phrase structure identified on the score.

## CONCLUSION

I recently had the opportunity to meet Pablo Veron, one of the most well-known tango dancers of the younger generation from Argentina. For those of you who may have seen Sally Potter's film, *The Tango Lesson*, Veron played the true-to-life tango maestro. When I met him, I discovered he also has musical training. Thinking here is a dancer who also has a passion for music, I was curious about his view of the dance-music relationship. I asked him how he listens to music while he is dancing...as a musician? just for inspiration for movement? He simply replied without thinking about it, "The music *is* the dance." While I cannot quite agree they are one and the same, his immediate reply illustrates to me how closely they are connected in the Argentine tango. I hope I have at least scratched the surface of this mysterious and elusive subject today.