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## Choreomusicology II Translocality | Local Ontologies



**WVW**

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# the world of music (new series)

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**the world of music (new series)**

**vol. 9 (2020) 2**

**Choreomusicology II  
Translocality | Local Ontologies**

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## Choreomusicology II Translocality | Local Ontologies

### Articles

Kendra Stepputat and Elina Djebbari	The Separation of Music and Dance in Translocal Contexts . . . . .	5
Elina Djebbari	Temporalities of Appropriation of Salsa Music and Dance in Benin: A Choreomusical Approach . . . . .	31
Kendra Stepputat	Tango Musicality and Tango Danceability: Reconnecting Strategies in Current Cosmopolitan Tango Argentino Practice . . . . .	51
Made Mantle Hood and Sydney Hutchinson	Beyond the Binary of Choreomusicology: Moving from Ethnotheory Towards Local Ontologies . . . . .	69
Sydney Hutchinson	Dancing <i>lo típico</i> : A Choreomusical Perspective on Merengue . . . . .	89
Made Mantle Hood	Separating Intertwined Traditions into Balinese Music and Dance . . . . .	109

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### Book Reviews (Eva-Maria Alexandra van Straaten, ed.)

Charissa Granger	Hope Munro, <i>What She Go Do: Women in Afro-Trinidadian Music</i> . (2016) . . . . .	131
Paul J. Yoon	Angela Ahlgren, <i>Drumming Asian America: Taiko, Performance, and Cultural Politics</i> . (2018) . . . . .	133

Maramé Gueye	Catherine M. Appert, <i>In Hip Hop Time: Music, Memory, and Social Change in Urban Senegal.</i> (2018) .....	136
Thomas Bergmann	Michael B. Bakan, <i>Speaking for Ourselves. Conversations on Life, Music and Autism.</i> (2019) ..	137
Lennart Ritz	Jennifer Iverson, <i>Electronic Inspirations. Technologies of the Cold War Musical Avant-Garde.</i> (2019) .....	141
Edgar W. Pope	W. Anthony Sheppard, <i>Extreme Exoticism: Japan in the American Musical Imagination.</i> (2019) .....	144
Patrick Murphy	Michael Silvers, <i>Voices of Drought: The Politics of Music and Environment in Northeastern Brazil.</i> (2018) .....	147
<hr/>		
<b>About the Contributors</b>	.....	151
<i>the world of music (new series)</i>	.....	153

# **Tango Musicality and Tango Danceability: Reconnecting Strategies in Current Cosmopolitan Tango Argentino Practice**

**Kendra Steputat**

*Abstract*

*Wherever tango argentino is practiced, teachers offer “musicality” classes for dancers and “dance introduction” workshops for musicians. Why does it seem necessary at this point in the development of translocal tango argentino to reconnect the two practices? To answer this question, this article examines the historical development of the tango and the points in history at which the music and dance diverged. I offer a historical perspective on this development, but I also explore the phenomenon on the structural level of both the music material and the movement repertoire to understand how the musical and the kinetic elements relate and how structural changes impacted on their compatibility over time. Finally, I show how a choreomusical perspective can explain contemporary endeavours to reconnect the two layers in their multifaceted complexity.*

This article presents *tango argentino* as a translocal music and dance tradition in Europe. After introducing the history, practice, and music and dance structures of *tango argentino*, I will focus on the historical circumstances under which the music and dance developed into two separate practices to the extent that members of both communities, tango music on the one hand and tango dance on the other, rarely appreciate each other’s art. Finally, I will discuss the terms “musicality” and “danceability” and how they are used in the present discourse and practice of tango dancers and musicians who aim for a reconnection of music and dance in *tango argentino*.<sup>1</sup> I employ a choreomusical perspective as elaborated on in the introduction to the *Choreomusicology* double issue (2020/1) by Steputat and Seye.

## ***Tango Argentino*—a short history**

*Tango argentino* is a genre that arose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The booming town of Buenos Aires and Montevideo, its smaller sister city on

the other side of the Rio de la Plata delta in Uruguay, were places where people with very different cultural backgrounds met. Between the mid-nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, Argentina<sup>2</sup> experienced a vast immigration wave from Europe, with most immigrants coming from Italy (Azzi 1996:438, Ostuni 2008). Their languages and cultural backgrounds mixed with those of former slaves from African countries and local people in the region. One of the outcomes of this process was a new genre of music and dance which today is most commonly referred to as *tango argentino*.<sup>3</sup> The tango that ultimately became popular and established as a genre, first locally and soon after internationally, consists of music and dance structures bearing a strong resemblance to European genres and styles of the time.<sup>4</sup> The similarities include instrumentation, functional harmony and rhythmic/metric organization. In terms of dance structures, elements from European couple dances are recognisable, including the roles of leader and follower, the asymmetric embrace, and basic steps in direct relation to the underlying beat.

*Tango argentino* came from Argentina to Europe in the first decade of the twentieth century. The first city to adopt tango music and dance as a new and exciting vogue was Paris, which was the cultural centre and place of reference for many bourgeois Europeans at that time. From there, the vogue spread to other European capitals (Klothmann 2008:16–20). Tango dance teachers from Argentina (Buenos Aires) came to Europe to teach the dance (Link and Wendland 2016:15); at the same time, tango musicians toured Europe and made recordings in European studios (Fares 2015:178). This “tangomania” (Cooper 1995) spread and expanded well into the 1930s (e.g., Collier 1992:99), and local forms of the tango developed in many countries (Pelinski 2000). Europe also served as a stepping stone for the tango’s further spread to other continents.<sup>5</sup>

As a result of its appreciation in Europe, *tango argentino* found acceptance in upper-class Argentinian society and started to increase in popularity there as well. Its golden age, the *época de oro*, lasted from the mid-1930s to the early 1950s in the Rio de la Plata area. During this period, most tango orchestras (*orquesta típica*), that are still renowned today, emerged and played their music regularly at *milongas* (tango dance events). It was also during this period that tango orchestras such as those of Carlos Di Sarli, Juan D’Arienzo, Osvaldo Pugliese, Francisco Canaro, and Aníbal Troilo set the standard for how *tango argentino* played as dance accompaniment should sound, yet each orchestra had its own distinct orchestral style (see Krüger 2012:104–119). An important means of dissemination of *tango argentino*, both in Argentina and internationally, were films starring popular tango singers<sup>6</sup> or orchestras that promoted artists as well as the genre itself.

The decline of *tango argentino* both as an international phenomenon and a prominent Argentinian genre was greatly influenced by political events (most prominently the two World Wars in Europe and the military regime in Argentina from 1976 to 1983) as well as cultural developments since the 1950s (e.g., the rise of jazz and rock ‘n’ roll music and dancing, see Luker 2007:72). Yet *tango argentino* continued to develop as a musical style, mainly due to the work of Astor Piazzolla. Starting in the

1960s, Piazzolla incorporated musical elements from several other genres including jazz and rock. He also composed pieces for classical Euro-American orchestras that prominently featured tango elements. His “new tango” style (*tango nuevo*) revolutionised the way *tango argentino* was perceived, played, and composed in both Europe and Argentina.

*Tango argentino* as a dance became popular in Europe and beyond for the second time through an organised tour that combined tango dance and music performances in a full evening stage production simply called “*Tango Argentino*” (Cara 2009:438, 444, Fares 2015:186–187). The tango dancers in this show were all either renowned social tango dancers in Buenos Aires or younger, promising stage dancers taught by the older generation of social tango dancers (Denniston 2007:93–94, 170–171). They revolutionised stage tango, moving away from performances of tango as a social dance towards a new tango dance genre (*tango escenario* or *espectaculo*) which featured more athletic movements borrowed from ballet, involving extended lines, and a fixed choreography (Cara 2009:441).

Parallel to the second vogue in Europe, *tango argentino* experienced a revival in Argentina—predominantly called *renovación* (“renovation”, Luker 2007:67)—which was directly tied to the fall of the military regime in 1983 (Cara 2009, Luker 2007). Tango became a cultural symbol for the process of reclaiming the state and “Argentinean-ness” (Luker 2007, Merritt 2012:42–43). Since the 1990s, European tango dancers have travelled to Argentina to learn more about *tango argentino*, and this trend has continued to grow in the early years of the twenty-first century. As a result of these travels and an increased engagement with *tango argentino* as a cultural product in general, a deeper understanding of the social functions and rules of tango as a social dance has spread. Many tango dancers began to appreciate the socially danced tango of the *época de oro*, which has in turn resulted in the increased reception of *época de oro* tango orchestras. Subsequently, a revival of *tango argentino* music (Bolasell 2011, Peralta 2014) composed and played for both a listening and a dancing audience gained momentum, again on both sides of the Atlantic.

### Tango music and dance structures

The *tango argentino* of today has witnessed many changes and yet bears obvious connections to the tango of one hundred years ago. Starting in the 1930s and continuing to the present, the typical tango orchestra instrumentation includes strings, a piano, and several bandoneóns. A tango is generally in 4/4 meter and either has an equal stress on all four beats (called *marcato in quatro*) or a stress on the first and third beat (*marcato in dos*), as well as a variety of syncopated rhythmic structures in the accompaniment. A prominent feature of many tango orchestras is *arrastre* (lit., to drag), describing the anticipation of the first beat (downbeat) of a bar by a glissando and crescendo leading towards it which starts after the last upbeat of the bar before. Tango melodies can be grouped into two main styles: the rhythmical style,

which Link and Wendland (2016:32) call “motive driven,” and the lyrical, legato style which treats the melody in an “elastic, and loose rhythmic manner relative to the beat.” Harmonic structures in *tango argentino* are mostly within the range of Euro-American functional harmony and often in a minor key with a signature V-I (dominant-tonic) chord structure at the end of a piece. Phrases of four or eight bars are usually grouped into two main parts (A and B) with a varied repetition of the first part (A B A’).

The *tango argentino* of the 1920s onward is a couple dance in which a leader and a follower embrace. Non-verbal communication between the leader and the follower is essential because *tango argentino* is based on improvisation within the boundaries of an agreed-upon movement repertoire instead of step sequences. This repertoire can be broken down into steps (front, side, back) and turns, of which there is an almost endless variety. Some more common step/turn combinations have names, for instance the “ocho”, “cruzada” or “sacada.”<sup>7</sup> It is possible to embellish the basic steps with additional movements of the feet and legs, something more advanced tango dancers develop to make their dance more individual or aesthetic or to interpret musical elements with movement. Most dance action takes place in the lower body, while the upper body stays more stable and connected to the partner. There are three main forms of embrace. The first is the close embrace, in which the partners’ torsos touch from the chest to the belly, and the left (follower) and right (leader) arms are tightly wrapped around the partner. Still close but without torsos touching is the “salon” embrace, and at the other end of the spectrum is the open embrace, where only the arms are in contact and the space between the partners offers room for much larger leg movements.

At a *milonga*, dance couples move counter-clockwise around the dance floor, and the improvised steps and turns are carried out in close relation to the music. Dancing at a *milonga* is a challenging endeavour for a tango dancer, because in addition to the joint movement improvisation to the music, dance couples have to coordinate their use of space with the other couples on the dance floor.

### **Translocal tango today**

*Tango argentino* today is not a homogeneous phenomenon; it is more of an umbrella term for a variety of styles. Musically, it includes all tango music composed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and in terms of movement repertoire, it comprises a continuum ranging from close embrace, small movements, and intimate connection in the couple (*milonguero* style) to space-consuming, open embrace, off-axis *neotango*<sup>8</sup> style. The diversity of interrelated and overlapping names for music and dance styles might be confusing, however it offers the individual dancer many opportunities to find whatever suits their needs and aesthetic preferences.<sup>9</sup> An increasing number of dancers prefer *milonguero* dancing. Their demands are met by the growing number of tango meetings (*encuentros*) with restricted access, a trend

that started in Europe about ten years ago and seems to be spreading to other continents.

In virtually every large city in Europe one can learn *tango argentino*, either in a dance school, from independent tango teachers or through a registered tango association. Often in addition there are organised workshops taught by renowned guest teachers. For most practitioners, tango dancing is about dancing at *milongas* with different partners and experiencing new dancers, events and locations; thus tango dancers who wish to immerse themselves more deeply into *tango argentino* will start to travel to other (larger) tango communities, tango festivals, and weekend dance events like *encuentros* or tango marathons. It is likely that at some point in their tango biography, they will travel to Buenos Aires to experience *tango argentino* as close to its roots as possible (Stepputat 2015).

Social media—Facebook in particular—has become the main source of information about tango practice: Every tango marathon, festival, and *encuentro* as well as local organisers of regular tango events have Facebook pages, groups, and events. Travelling teachers, tango DJs, and other professionals use Facebook as their primary marketing tool. Accordingly, Facebook users form a vast tango-related friendship network, actively sharing information and constantly forming new “friendships.” As a result, they get “tango-filter-bubbled” by social media algorithms. Channels like YouTube or Vimeo provide films of events, performances, or classes, which further inform and therefore influence tango dancers in their tango consumption choices. Other media such as blogs, newsletters, print media, and last but not least word-of-mouth exchange of information at tango dance events contribute to the construction of a translocal social tango dancers’ network.

The international community of tango musicians is much smaller than that of tango dancers but nevertheless present, active, and flourishing. People of varied musical background and skills are drawn towards playing tango music and joining a tango ensemble or even dedicating years of education to become a professional tango musician.<sup>10</sup> “Tango community orchestras” bring together people without professional aspirations who love to play tango.<sup>11</sup> Established tango musicians turn to teaching tango to other musicians and found new ensembles—professional or community based—or join existing ones. The number of professional tango ensembles has risen significantly over the last 30 years (see Bolasell 2011:47–70) both inside and outside of Argentina. This trend goes hand in hand with the previously mentioned second wave of tango dance popularity.

*Tango argentino* attracts dancers and musicians from across cultures and continents. The way it is practiced today—mainly outside the Rio de la Plata delta—defines it as a translocal and cosmopolitan genre. In accordance with Thomas Turino’s (2003:61–63) definition, it is a relocated genre that has an area (here Buenos Aires, Argentina) with which it is associated but has moved away from that place of origin into many other areas<sup>12</sup> and is practiced by people forming a “cultural cohort” (Turino 2008:111,115).<sup>13</sup> As we have shown in the introductory article on music and dance in translocal contexts (Stepputat and Djebbari in this volume), translocal cultural prac-

tices are not necessarily practiced by people identifying as cosmopolitan. Yet *tango argentino* is clearly cosmopolitan: both tango dancers and musicians mostly come from well-educated and financially stable backgrounds (Kämpfe 2007:83, Stepputat 2012:178, Fares 2015:180, Luker 2007:81) and have liberal worldviews as well as a profound interest in innovation and a fascination with something locally distinct yet different from the “own” (Turino 2003:72).

The community that has grown around *tango argentino* as a translocal phenomenon comprises the two loosely connected groups of tango musicians versus tango dancers. Why have the paths of tango music and dance diverged and each developed into cultural practices in their own right? To answer this question, I will explore the historical, political, economic and also structural circumstances of translocal *tango argentino*.

### **The diverging paths of tango music and dance**

Tango music and dance developed into separate practices over the course of the twentieth century. Tango was, and continues to be, danced to composed music. The music leads the dancers and does not change, and the dancers depend on the music (Stepputat 2017:35). While the musicians need to play music that caters to the needs of the dancers, they do not interact on the spot, nor do they react to the dancers musically. Therefore, recorded tango music is generally as suitable for the requirements of tango dancers as music played live.

Recorded tango music has a long history. The first medium for *tango argentino* was the *organito*, a portable barrel organ programmed with a selection of tunes.<sup>14</sup> In the golden days of tango, live orchestras played regularly at *milongas* in Buenos Aires, and a large number of recordings by those same orchestras was already available on shellac (see Link 2009:27). However before the 1950s, tango music and dance practice were closely related because tango musicians did not play a “non-danceable” tango as the only performance context was to play for a dancing crowd, as Christophe Apprill notes (1999:75): “[1925–1955] Tango music was only played for dancers and did not exist outside of this context: the very notion of a tango concert was unknown.”<sup>15</sup> In addition, public amplification systems were not yet capable of relaying music loud enough to be heard in a large room full of dancing people, so live music was the only option for dance accompaniment in a public space (see Doyle 2015).

This close connection changed dramatically in the mid twentieth century due to political and economic developments with both local and global impact. At that time, the Argentinian economy was still one of the strongest worldwide. Political turmoil, *coups d'état* in 1930 and 1943, and a substantial change in the economic system towards a state-controlled economy gradually reduced the country's growth. By the mid-1950s, the economy had stagnated, leading to high inflation. With the currency losing its monetary value, the large tango orchestras were simply not able

to survive. The golden era of tango ended, and the up and coming genre of rock 'n' roll and its Argentinian counterpart, *rock nacional*, replaced the tango as the most prominent Argentinian music and dance form (Luker 2007:72).

While tango dancing fell out of vogue both in Argentina and internationally, tango music still had an audience. Some of the large tango orchestras continued to play into the 1960s, but their performances turned into concerts for listening instead of dancing, taking place in large theatres (Azzi and Collier 2000:79). In addition, Astor Piazzolla<sup>16</sup> left Paris and returned to Buenos Aires, starting the tango revolution as leader of the tango “*vanguard*” (Luker 2007:72, Apprill 1999:76). Piazzolla’s musical innovations made it impossible to dance to this new tango music (*tango nuevo*) with the movement repertoire of an *época de oro* tango dancer. In fact, Piazzolla purposefully and knowingly composed tangos for listening and not for dancing.

The tango dance culture reached its lowest point during the time of the military regime (1976–1983). Cara explains:

Under the military government a disinclination to engage in tango dancing by all generations and classes reflected a more serious reluctance to gather publicly at milongas, for fear of reprisal. This was the time for gazing at staged performances and listening to tango musicians, without engaging in the dance. In fact, it was difficult to find a place to take tango lessons during *la Guerra Sucia* (The dirty war). (Cara 2009:444)

Tango music was transformed primarily into a concert genre, and tango dancing, if practiced at all, was carried out in private. Following Argentina’s democratization (1983) and a renewed interest in the “national genre” *tango argentino*, tango dancing resurfaced in the 1980s. The spark of revival was also brought to other continents with the staged tango show *Tango Argentino* (Cara 2009:441). Here, both music and dance were performed together again, but the performance built on show elements and choreography as well as post-Piazzolla, *tango nuevo*-based tango concert music. This form of staged tango did not feature what social tango dancers later called the intimate connection between tango music and improvised tango movements. However, a new generation both inside and outside Argentina started to become interested in tango dancing through this show.

In Europe, tango dance teachers used whatever tango music recordings were available for their classes. This was foremost *tango nuevo* music, and any recording or CD compilation that was available as “tango” on the market. Tango dancers from outside Argentina started to travel to Buenos Aires to immerse themselves in the “tango mecca” (Stepputat 2015) and brought back CDs that were produced to cater for their interests: collections of famous tango compositions, often of dubious quality. The term “for export” became a signifier for these early compilations (Goertzen and Azzi 1999:71). A typical tango dance evening in Europe in the 1990s had background tango music from a couple of cassettes or CDs that were loop played throughout the evening. There was little connection made between tango as dance and tango as music; tango music often fulfilled an ambient function rather than being something to which a student or dancer listened in order to actively connect their dance steps to it. At the same time, tango dancing was taught in a way that made

moving to the music less important. Tango movements were codified into sets of step sequences that were easy to teach, repeat, lead, and follow (Merritt 2012:46–47). It is next to impossible to interpret small nuances such as rhythmic variations or melodic ornamentations with a set step sequence, which illustrates how little importance was put on interpreting the music with the dancing.

One of the most important innovations in tango dancing took place in the mid-1990s. Under the lead of Gustavo Naveira (and his partner Giselle Anne) together with Fabian Salas (with Lola Diaz) and Mariano “Chicho” Frumboli (first with Eugenia Parilla, currently with Juana Sepulveda)<sup>17</sup>, the tango movement repertoire was completely deconstructed and shaped into what is often called *neotango* (Merritt 2012:45–46, 49–50). Leading techniques, posture, and body dynamics were changed into a generally more fluid connection of movements, leading to an expansion of the movement repertoire (Carozzi 2015:155–156). Through this development in leading technique and a restructuring of movement principles (termed “physical mechanics” by Merritt 2012:46), many of the movements that had been brought into the tango movement repertoire for choreographed staged dances could now be incorporated back into social, improvised tango dancing. Step sequences were broken down into step principles and taught as such, opening up endless possibilities for individual improvisation; a shift occurred from teaching “words” to teaching “the alphabet” (Merritt 2012:47). However this new freedom did not result in a stronger connection between tango music and tango dance—at least not directly. While it opened up possibilities for improvisation to classical tango dance music, *neotango* also permitted dancers to dance to a much broader range of music, for instance *electrotango*<sup>18</sup> and most importantly “non-tango” music. A vivid example are show dances by Chicho Frumboli and Juana Sepulveda in which they dance to a piano composition by Alexandre Desplat (“The Engagement”)<sup>19</sup> as well as “Clair de Lune” by Claude Debussy<sup>20</sup>.

This new way of moving to tango and non-tango music influenced tango dancers worldwide and revolutionised all “styles” that were still to come. It also gave rise to the phrase “tango can be danced to everything”—a new freedom in embodied musical expression and at the same time a further disconnection of tango dance and tango music (see Torp 2013:242). This is in accordance with one of the main criticisms of turn-of-the-century tango musicians regarding tango dancers: they just do gymnastics and dance to any kind of music (Apprill 1999:81). Such statements illustrate how deeply estranged “tango dance musicality” and tango music had become.

Often a development in one direction causes a countermovement. This is exactly what happened in the development of tango at the turn of the century, leading to a bifurcation of tango styles (see Carozzi 2015:155). A new emphasis was put on dancing in close embrace, within a small space, and without disturbing other couples on a crowded dancefloor (see Cara 2009:454–455). This way of dancing was termed *milonguero*.<sup>21</sup> The paradigm shift away from sequences back to steps is continued in *milonguero* tango dancing, opening up possibilities to interpret tango music in a much more subtle way.<sup>22</sup> The rediscovery and appreciation of the music of the

golden age, which is considered to be the most “authentic” (Petridou 2009:63–64, also Carozzi 2015:107–113) ran parallel to the new love of many tango dancers to adopt the *milonguero* style. This music was, and still often remains, very far from the music aesthetics and experiences tango dancers—especially young ones and those living outside Buenos Aires—have outside of tango. *Época de oro* music has to be actively learned, listened and danced to for a considerable time before it can be appreciated:

There is something ascetic (a ritual of initiation perhaps) about the idea that learning tango means repeating walking exercises for several months. Similarly, learning to appreciate and interpret the music of the “Golden Age” takes time. A full knowledge of the music is crucial to understand the *milonguero* who takes long pauses and dances to the phrases of the tango, not rushing to step on every beat. (Petridou 2009:67)

Theoretically, both *neotango* and *milonguero* styles allow tango dancers to interpret tango music through improvisation by emphasizing steps instead of sequences. Why, then, have tango dancers since the 1990s, and throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, not danced to tango music played live, or to newly composed tango music? The answer lies in the development of tango into concert music. Since the 1960s, it has continuously evolved away from music for dancing into music for listening. When tango dance, after its revival, met tango music, the two turned out to be incompatible. Hence the dancers’ need to dance to different kinds of music: either finding music outside tango, turning to *electrotango*, or returning to the repertoire of the *época de oro*. In 1999, at the peak of this development, Apprill asserts that “[o]rchestras that can animate a dance event today can be counted on one hand in Europe” (1999:87).<sup>23</sup>

In the same article, Apprill focuses on the view musicians have of tango dancers and the problems they encounter playing at a *milonga*. First of all, it should be noted that in the 1990s, it was not at all common to invite live musicians to *milongas*, mainly due to the financial risk for the organiser (Apprill 1999:77). Therefore, dancers were not used to dancing to live tango music and as a consequence, if challenged to do so, had problems relating to live music and preferred recordings. Moreover, some dancers might not even have been interested in listening to tango music at all. Instead, tango music was considered to be a necessary soundscape for their dancing but not something to be actively appreciated (also Apprill 1999:81, 87). Hence, musicians considered performing at a *milonga* as playing “functional” music in contrast to presenting their “true art” in a concert setting.

From the perspective of dancers, tango musicians playing a post-Piazzolla repertoire at *milongas* did not provide suitable accompaniment for social tango dancing. It is obvious that both sides—musicians and dancers—saw the other as unfit in providing what was needed, both parties being ignorant of the other’s tango. This situation continued throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, most prominently in Europe and Northern America. Yet slowly but with increasing momentum, tango music and dance have started to reconnect.

**“Musicality” and “danceability”:** strategies to reconnect

Almost twenty years into the twenty-first century, one of the greatest compliments a dancer can give their partner is “You dance so musically!” Some time has passed since dancers defined themselves primarily by the number of complicated figures they had mastered. This change was already evident in the past decade and has been mentioned by Petridou (2009:63), who states: “The emphasis is shifted from technical skills of display toward a harmonious response to the music.” Similarly, Link and Wendland (2016:17) note: “While people are drawn to the milonga for many reasons, true *milongueros/milongueras* become absorbed in the music and their connection to each other”, while Apprill (1999:86) asserts that “[i]t is obviously this dialogue between the couples and the music that, when it is realised, gives this dance its sublime character.”<sup>26</sup>

Many tango teachers as well as more advanced amateur tango dancers naturally work on their individual technique and practice movements and movement principles. Yet if you ask them what is most important to them, what draws them to tango and fascinates them in this dance, the most important reasons mentioned are the connection to their partner and the possibility to interpret tango music through movement. To train this embodied interpretation of tango music, courses are offered in “tango musicality,” a recently coined term. The first paradigm shift in tango teaching was from sequences to movement principles. The next revolution in tango teaching is now under way and making an impact: one of the ultimate goals of a tango dancer is to listen to and understand tango music. “Tango musicality” as used in contemporary tango discourse can thus be defined as the ability of a dancer to express the music through their dancing. This encompasses the ability to improvise an embodied response to the music, drawing on, but not limited to, tango movement techniques that visualise rhythmic structures, pauses, and phrases or relate to musical articulation (*e.g.*, staccato or legato).

In 1999, Apprill noticed that experienced tango dancers had started teaching “the dance steps as well as their musicality”<sup>27</sup> (Apprill 1999:87). Ten years later, Joaquín Amenábar wrote, “[t]he teacher should, from the start, create in the mind of the dancer a correspondence between movement and the music” (Amenábar 2009:112). By 2019, “musicality” had become a widely accepted and promoted element of tango dance teaching and learning.

The musicality paradigm in tango dancing has opened up new possibilities for both musicians and dance teachers to position themselves in the market. Offering “musicality” workshops and classes for tango dancers is a phenomenon that first emerged about ten years ago. Both travelling tango dance teachers, local tango schools, and individual teachers regularly offer classes devoted to this topic. This trend can be followed on YouTube by watching a broad variety of films that demonstrate tango musicality, in social media discussions, and on tango-related blogs.<sup>28</sup> More traditional publications have also appeared on the market: books that target a tango dancing audience and educate them about tango music in general or,

very specifically, about how to dance tango musically. The most prominent book in this area is Amenábar's *Tango—Let's dance to the music* (2009). Michael Lavocah *Tango stories—Musical secrets* (2014) and David Thomas *Twenty tango orchestras* (2016) are both books that provide insight into tango music—mostly of the golden age era—for the general public. Stocking up on music from the *época de oro* is also part of many dancers' efforts to broaden their musical repertoire. Two large projects that facilitate access to this music should be mentioned: tangotunes in Austria, a digitization project started in 2013 that cleans, filters, and distributes original tango recordings, and the *Reliquias* series by EMI/DBN in Argentina, which has digitised and reissued recordings since 2002.<sup>29</sup>

An important development that has happened in parallel with the reconnecting of tango dance and music is the growing importance of tango DJing. Discussion on this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this contribution, but it should be noted that the last twenty to twenty-five years have witnessed a gradual shift toward professional tango DJing, with the result that dancers increasingly put an emphasis on dancing to music that is carefully selected for the occasion and make up an appreciative market for tango DJing.

The approaches and priorities in teaching “musicality” differ greatly. One strategy teachers use is to explain fundamental musical structures of tango music (e.g., rhythmic structures, phrase lengths, closing harmonic formulas, sections) and give examples of how to interpret these through movement, for instance by creating pauses in the dance when long notes appear, or ending a movement pattern in time with the end of a phrase. Some teachers work with their students on interpreting one particular recording of a piece and its phrases, variations, and embellishments. This second approach is often criticised as too limiting. Students learn one piece by heart and are helpless if another piece is played, almost as if they were back to learning step sequences instead of movements. Nevertheless, it is possible to abstract principles from learning one piece; thus the latter approach at least helps to familiarise dancers with the music and gives them specific tools to use in their “musical dancing.” Note that dancing musically is not a question of style; it does not matter if a person dances in *neotango*, *salón*, *milonguero* or any other style—dancers can be “musical” or “unmusical” in any of them (see Apprill 1999:85).

The topic of tango musicality is often combined with discussions about “tango danceability,” a term broadly meaning the ability of a piece of music to make a person want to dance *tango argentino* to it. Although certain musical features are absolutely necessary to make a tune sound like tango and provide the basics needed for dancing (such as absolute tempo, instrumentation, even beat emphasis), there is no clear definition of what is considered “danceable.” Each tango dancer has different dance and music experiences as well as specific personal preferences. However, according to an online survey<sup>30</sup> conducted in 2018, golden age music is generally felt to be most danceable (see Stepputat *et al.* 2019).

Antipathies towards music played live at dance events run deep and have their roots in the 1990s. Earlier I described musicians' reactions and judgements of the

dancing crowd, which they perceived as unable to appreciate tango music, let alone dance properly to it. I also depicted dancers thinking that the music played often did not even provide the fundamental necessities for improvisation with the given movement repertoire. Most tango music of the 1990s is indeed intended for listening and consequently considered to be “hard to dance to” or outright “not danceable” by many dancers. However, tango musicians have since come to realise that playing for a dancing audience can be rewarding in terms of both artistic acknowledgement and financial outcome. As a consequence, organisers of tango festivals have increasingly invited tango ensembles or orchestras to play live at one of the evening grand *milongas*. More tango musicians have started to learn dancing or have at least taken part in workshops to obtain basic knowledge of tango dance principles. Encouraged by this, from the early 2000s on, an increasing number of tango musicians have dedicated their musical practice to playing “danceable tango music.” Nowadays, many ensembles advertise themselves to tango dance event organisers directly through emails or social media messages, offering concerts with “danceable tango music” and sometimes including proposals for musicality classes for dancers.<sup>31</sup>

Such ensembles have fundamentally revised their repertoire. A common approach to gain tango “danceability” is to base performances on pre-Piazzolla musical material and play it either as close to the original as possible or with only slight stylistic variations, as for instance the orchestra La Juan D’Arienzo or the Sexteto Milonguero. Others compose and perform genuinely new pieces inspired by *época de oro* style, for example Astillero and Andariega<sup>32</sup>. Without going into detail about musical aspects I want to at least mention exemplary factors that are most relevant for danceability, which are limited tempo variations and the abandonment of overly dramatic arrangements, complex harmonic progressions, and solo insertions.

### **Obstacles—and (no) conclusion**

Starting in the 1960s, tango music and tango dance practitioners diverged into communities that are aware of each other but do not necessarily appreciate or understand the other’s peculiarities. Following the return of democracy in Argentina in 1983, *tango argentino* experienced a fundamental revival (*renovación*) in both music and dance. By then, tango music and dance had developed in such different directions that it took almost twenty years for the two to start reconnecting. This reconnection has been supported by the advent of professional tango DJing, the focus of more tango ensembles on performing danceable tango music, and an emphasis on musicality in tango dancing. This development is still ongoing.

However, this process is a slow one and keeps encountering obstacles on its way. These include financial risks for organisers who invite live tango musicians to dance events and have to cover not only their fees but also travel expenses, in addition to the cost of renting technical equipment and dance halls with enough extra space for the tango musicians. Another challenge is that teaching tango

musicality to dancers who are beginners is certainly a noble aim, but the complexity of tango dancing often prohibits fast progress. Beginners have so much work to do in order to coordinate their own body movements with those of their partners that it may take years before they are able to “walk on the beat,” not to mention freely improvise to music (Apprill 1999:79, Amenábar 2009:112–113). Understandably, many teachers leave aspects of musicality out of beginner’s classes and prefer to use figures and step sequences to provide their dance students with a sense of instant gratification. In addition, tango DJs, who have a major influence on the taste and musical knowledge of tango dancers, mostly focus on recordings from the *época de oro*. In recent years, a few DJs have started to include music by new tango ensembles into their repertoire, alternating them with older recordings to create a *milonga* with music that is constantly danceable. Nevertheless, these DJs are still a minority. Finally, one inevitable obstacle is that tango dancers do not necessarily have musical experience or basic knowledge of music in general, nor do they have any particular interest in tango music per se. At the same time, tango musicians might not have any background in movement practice, nor do they dance tango.

In the past ten years, teachers have started to tackle this ignorance and divide, striving towards a mutual appreciation based on the premise that one’s own skill will advance by understanding that of the other. Time will tell if and how the process of reconnecting *tango argentino* music and dance—once intimately connected—will continue. It will depend on organisers, musicians, teachers, DJs, and other key figures in translocal tango practice, their priorities, and their attitudes towards this issue.

## Notes

- 1 This article is based on more than a decade of experience with cosmopolitan tango practice as an active dancer (mainly in Europe and to a lesser extent in Southeast Asia) as well as results from a recent research project (2015–19) entitled “Tango-danceability of music in European perspective” (FWF project V423).
- 2 The cities of Montevideo in Uruguay and Buenos Aires in Argentina are the cradle of the tango, even if today the tango is most prominently associated and identified with Buenos Aires—hence the popular name *tango argentino* (Stepputat 2015).
- 3 The third important part of tango culture is tango lyrics. Tango *canción* (song) developed into a singer-focused genre and has its own particular lyrical tradition. Important publications about tango lyrics include Villariño (1965), Negro (2001), and Mert (2016).
- 4 Early tango had many more Afro-American elements, which were “whitewashed” over time. For an introduction to this discourse, see Plisson (2001), Karush (2012), and Torp (2007:137–228).
- 5 See for instance Fares (2015) and Savigliano (1995:169–206) for the development in Japan, and Groppa (2010) for the dissemination to Northern America.

- 6 For instance, Carlos Gardel, probably the most famous tango singer of all times. A detailed biography has been published by Collier (1986); see also Navitzki (2011) for an introduction to Gardel and his role in the Argentinian film industry.
- 7 For more detailed information on tango dance movements and terms, see Benzecry Sabá (2010).
- 8 *Neotango* dance style is also known as *tango nuevo*, which is the same term as that for post-Piazzolla tango music. For the sake of terminological clarity, in this text I use *nuevo* for the music and *neotango* for the dance style.
- 9 See also Carozzi (2015:133–173) and Bolasell (2011:157–169) for an overview of the development of style in tango dancing and Krüger (2012:188–200) for an analysis of more contemporary music forms.
- 10 Few institutions offer tango argentino as a field of study. In Europe, the best established is Codarts Rotterdam, which offers BA and MA programs in *tango argentino music* (see <https://www.codarts.nl/en/worldmusic/argentinian-tango/>, last accessed 11 November 2020). Other performing arts universities offer workshops with professional tango musicians, for instance those organised by Tango Sin Fin, which tours North America and Europe each year but also has a school in Buenos Aires (see <https://tangosinfin.wordpress.com/>, last accessed 11 November 2020).
- 11 For instance the Berlin Community Tango Orchestra (see Facebook site at <https://www.communitytangoorchestra.org/>, last accessed 11 November 2020).
- 12 Of course it is still practiced in Buenos Aires—very intensively so—both as music and as a dance form. See Cara (2009:452–453) and Carozzi (2015).
- 13 Turino (2003:111) defines cultural cohorts as “social groupings that form along the lines of specific constellations of shared habit based in similarities of *parts* of the self” (italics in the original).
- 14 See Pesce (2011:315–337) on the *organito* in tango.
- 15 “La musique tango se joue alors pour les danseurs et n’existe pas en dehors de ce contexte: la notion même de concert de tango est inconnu.”
- 16 See Azzi and Collier (2000) for a detailed biographical and musical overview of Piazzolla’s work and influence.
- 17 See the documentary film “Chicho—a conversation” by Eric Finke (2014) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2iYehErZ\\_yE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2iYehErZ_yE). Last accessed 11 November 2020.
- 18 This genre emerged at the turn of century and was often connected to *neotango* dancing. It was prominent for about ten years and then disappeared from use in tango dance (Liska 2017:71–76).
- 19 Presentation at the Mediterranean Summer Tango Festival in Porec, Croatia. See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=81&v=SZYozdzrvmM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=81&v=SZYozdzrvmM), last accessed 11 November 2020.
- 20 Presentation at the Salerno Tango Festival 2013 in Salerno, Italy. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GETZcsmgYus>, last accessed 11 November 2020.
- 21 Alternative terms including *apilado*, *confiteria*, or *estilo del centro* exist, but internationally, *milonguero* is most frequently used today. The term is commonly attributed to Susana Miller, who is a prominent teacher of this style of dancing. See <http://www.laacademiaticango.com/con-ten/quienes-somos>, last accessed 11 November 2020.

- 22 See also Carozzi (2015:160–164) on the “codification” (*codificación*) and the redefinition of close embrace style as “*estilo milonguero*” into something more cosmopolitan yet “orthodox” and de-eroticised.
- 23 “Les orchestres qui aujourd’hui peuvent animer pleinement des bals se comptent sur les doigts d’une main en Europe.”
- 24 “Tempo un peu vif, plutôt stable.”
- 25 “Les musiciens ont pris de grand libertés de rythme et de forme et produisent une musique destinée uniquement à l’écoute. De leur côté, les danseurs ont compliqué leurs pas et codifié leurs figures et ont déplus en plus besoin d’un tempo stable et figé donc d’une musique perdant tout intérêt en dehors de la danse.”
- 26 “C’est évidemment ce dialogue entre les couples et la musique qui lorsqu’il se réalise confère à cette danse son caractère sublime.”
- 27 “Aussi prioritairement les pas de la danse que sa musicalité.”
- 28 See for instance <http://www.tangomentor.com>, <http://www.tangoplauderei.blogspot.com>, <http://www.tangoimmigrant.blogspot.com>, <http://www.tintaroja-tango.com.ar>. All last accessed 11 November 2020.
- 29 See <https://www.tangotunes.com/tangotunes.html> and an introduction to the Japanese tango series CTA and AMP at <http://www.loksze.com/thoughts/2009/09/24/tango-music-in-japan-part-2>, both last accessed 11 November 2020.
- 30 Results from the online survey are available at <http://www.dancetangomusic.com/pub/dtm-piece-rank-2018.pdf>.
- 31 As an organiser of tango dance events in Austria since 2010, I have received countless such messages, on average five per month.
- 32 See the mentioned ensembles’ websites at <http://www.lajuandarienzo.com>, <http://www.astillerotango.com.ar>, <http://www.andariegatango.com.ar>, <http://www.sextetomilonguero.com.ar>. All last accessed 11 November 2020.

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