

The History of Tango: The Music

The origins of tango are obscure. It is impossible to discover the facts because the records don't exist. Tango sprang from the poor and the disadvantaged, amongst people whose lives usually leave little trace in the history books. Nevertheless, we owe a great debt to the many dancers and musicians who gave shape to the tango, though we shall never know their names.

The oldest tango that is still in the repertoire of orchestras today was written by Rosendo Mendizabal, a pianist working in a club in Buenos Aires in the 1890s. Soon after this the first sound recordings of tango started to appear, with the first great tango written around 1905 by Angel Villoldo. The song was "El Choclo," one of the two tunes that almost everyone today instantly recognizes as tango. Villoldo wrote many influential tangos, and his tunes are still played regularly today. Choclo literally means corn-cob, but he was using it in a less literal and more bawdy sense. Villoldo's words quickly fell out of use, and were replaced in the 1940s by a lyric proclaiming grandly that with this the tango was born.

Around the turn of the 20th Century massive European immigration brought huge numbers of Italians to Buenos Aires. They brought with them a more lyrical style of violin playing, and the melodic influence of Neapolitan song, a key factor in the melodic beauty characteristic of tango. Soon afterwards, probably around 1910, the bandoneón, the emblematic instrument of the tango, arrived in Buenos Aires, perhaps brought by German immigrants or sailors. This large accordion-like instrument was invented, as a cheap substitute for a church organ in poorer communities. No other instrument sounds like the bandoneón. Once past the hurdle of learning where the notes actually are on the keyboard, bandoneonistas can create the most extraordinary, hauntingly beautiful sounds. By 1912 tango had its first real recording star, Juan Maglio, "Pacho", a bandoneonista, recording with flute, violin and guitar. His success in Buenos Aires was huge, and the position of the bandoneón as tango's key instrument was confirmed.

A driving force in the development of tango music had always been the dance, and around this time it was the dance that introduced the music to the world. Young men of good Argentine families (and Argentina was one of the richest countries in the world) would be sent to Europe to study or travel. Some of these young men, not surprisingly, had spent many happy hours in the brothels, clubs and bars in Buenos Aires, where they had learned to dance the tango. Polite society in Paris saw the dance for the first time and fell in love, and very soon the whole of Europe was whipped by a furious "tangomania". 1913 was the year of the tango. The impact back in Buenos Aires was profound. To the elite, tango had been something that they chose not to associate themselves with, in public at least. Now tango could move from the underground clubs and bars and into the salons of the wealthy.

In 1915 Pascual Contursi wrote a lyric called *Mi Noche Triste* for an existing tune, and in 1917 it was recorded by Carlos Gardel. Gardel was already a famous folk singer. He sang the story of the abandoned lover with passion and pain, as though he meant every word. The triumph was immense. Tragic love became the backbone of the tango repertoire, and the tango became universal. Gardel himself went on to become a huge icon throughout the whole Spanish speaking world. His rags to riches story (the illegitimate son of an impoverished French immigrant who became a superstar), his

warm personality, his compositional talent, his tragic death in a plane crash at the age of 44, and, of course, his glorious voice, made him one of the world's great popular heroes, and an enduring symbol of Buenos Aires.

The Golden Age of Tango begins in 1935 with Juan D'Arienzo and Rodolfo Biagi. Together they created a quicker style, with a characteristic 'electric' rhythm which dancers found completely irresistible. Although the more academic tango lovers were shocked by the musical innovation in the D'Arienzo-Biagi they loved it and flocked to the dance floors. The dance matured into one of the most beautiful couple dances the world has ever seen. There were more great orchestras than one could count, such as those led by Anibal Troilo, Carlos Di Sarli, Miguel Caló, Lucio Demare, Alfredo De Angelis or Osvaldo Pugliese. It was the period in tango's history when all the branches of this extraordinary art were most closely integrated, and each spurred the other on to ever more stunning achievements.

The coup that ousted president Juan Perón in 1955 brought a very different political climate, which was to hit the tango hard. The nationalistic Peronist government had encouraged Argentine music, for example by putting quotas on the amount of foreign music allowed to be played on the radio. The new regime, instantly suspicious of anything that was determinedly Argentine, because it implied nationalism and therefore Perón, discouraged tango, and encouraged the importation of music from abroad, bringing rock and roll and the new world youth culture to the young people of Buenos Aires. Also, bans on meetings of more than three people, for fear of political agitation, made public dances difficult, and the dancing went underground. Tango moved in a few years from a mass movement involving a huge proportion of the population of Buenos Aires, to a persecuted fringe activity, with many great artists being blacklisted or imprisoned for their Peronist connections.

The fall of the military junta in Argentina in 1983 and the phenomenal success throughout the world of the hit show *Tango Argentino*, premiered the same year, thrust tango back into the spotlight, catching both musicians and dancers unawares. Hastily thrown together tango shows sprang up in Buenos Aires, and began to follow tango Argentino around the world. Young people, keen once again to reassert their Argentine-ness, wanted to learn to dance the tango, and began trying to piece the dance back together as best they could. Dances that had been operating underground came back into the open, and people who hadn't danced for twenty five or thirty years gradually began to dance again.

Source: Denniston, Christine, "A Brief History to the History of Tango,"
http://www.totaltango.com/acatalog/tango_brief_intro_91.html

The History of Tango: The Dance

In the middle of the Nineteenth Century the British arrived to develop the railway network across Argentina. This opened up this practically deserted country, and made accessible its potentially huge wealth. It made possible the transportation of agricultural produce for export, and also the exploitation of mineral resources. The only thing missing was the workers necessary to make the landowners rich. The Argentine government decided to advertise in Europe for workers. They offered accommodation for a man's first week in Argentina with very generous rations, and sometimes subsidized passage. Immediately an avalanche of immigration began. Unlike the immigration to much of the New World, which might include families or whole communities hoping to start a new life in a new land, the immigration into Argentina was at first economic, people hoping to work for a few years, make some decent money, and then go back home to their families. So the overwhelming majority of the immigrants were men. By the beginning of the 20th century the overwhelming majority of people in Buenos Aires were immigrants. This meant that there was an enormous lack of women.

Brothels were major places of entertainment for the working classes. The terrible shortage of women in Buenos Aires made prostitution a thriving industry. With many potential clients and few working women, the consequence was that there would be queues in the brothels as men waited for the women to become available. Brothel owners in Buenos Aires would hire Tango musicians to perform. The idea that it was the prostitutes in the brothels that danced with the men while they waited is an appealing one, but doesn't make logical sense. Obviously the brothel's income would be maximized by keeping the girls busy at their primary occupation, so certainly at peak periods where the brothel was busiest, there would not be women available for dancing.

There were really only two practical ways for a man to get close to a woman under these circumstances. One was to visit a prostitute and the other was to dance. With so much competition from other men on the dance floor, if a man wanted a woman to dance with him, it was necessary for him to be a good dancer, and being a good dancer only meant one thing. It didn't matter if he knew lots of fancy steps, or if the other men thought he was a good dancer. The only thing that mattered was that the woman in his arms had a good time when she danced with him - because with so many other men to choose from, if she didn't enjoy dancing with him she wouldn't do it again, and neither would her friends.

This meant that it was necessary for the men to practice together in order to be good enough to dance with the women. It is important to remember that this was a time before recorded music was available. The only kind of music was live music, and there would have been very little of it. So if a group of men heard music playing they would jump at the chance to dance to it. In the brothels there would be live music and other men waiting. It seems quite obvious that the clients of the brothels would have danced together while they waited, making the most of the opportunity to practice, not because they wanted to dance with a prostitute, but because they wanted to be able to dance well when they got the opportunity to dance with a woman who was not a prostitute. It was the potential wives and sweethearts that lived in the tenement blocks - conventillos - that they were hoping for a chance to dance with. To win a sweetheart took something more, and being a good dancer helped a lot. The men practiced together, preparing for

that rare moment when they actually did have a woman in their arms. These were the people who created the tango as a dance.

Soon tango reached the houses of high-class families. Boys of those families went to the suburbs looking for fun and adventure. They returned home excited by their experience and what they had learned. They started teaching their sisters, neighbor girls, and other female members of the large Argentinean family, such as cousins and aunts, this most unusual new dance. Nonetheless, tango was still seen generally as a shameful, sinful element, to be dealt with in secret. It is important to remember that during the nineteenth century social dancing was done standing opposite to each other. The contact among the partners was limited to touching the hands at certain moments. Just to dance in front of each other the right arm of the man touching the back of the lady was a little too much. Tango was a dance in which there was a close embrace, cheek to cheek, chests together, the legs invading each other's space. Politicians of both right and left condemned it. They did not want this new nation to be associated with such a lewd dance.

Argentina developed very fast between 1880 and 1930. The whole city of Buenos Aires was rebuilt during this period. The country became one of the 10 richest nations in the world, a position it maintained until the early 1950's. During that period of fast development the very rich had the habit of going to Europe at least once a year. They had big homes in Paris or London. Their parties were regularly attended by the nobility, the famous and the very rich. It was they who introduced Argentine Tango to the Parisian nobility. Tango became the craze of the time right away.

Everybody started giving parties with Argentinean orchestras and tango lessons. Women's fashion had to change to adjust to the moves of tango. Their bulky dresses were replaced by lighter, looser ones. Tango became the dance of the moment; from Paris, rapidly migrated to the other big capitals, London, Rome, Berlin, and finally New York.

Sources:

Denniston, Christine, "A Brief History to the History of Tango,"
http://www.totaltango.com/acatalog/tango_brief_intro_91.html

Suppa, O. Sergio, "History of Tango" <http://totango.net/sergio.html>