Historical Origins, Musical Development, and Performance of Tango

Posted on September 29, 2018

View this essay online:
https://academic-master.com/historical-origins-musical-development-and-performance-of-tango/

Origins and Cultural Foundations of Tango

The dance of tango is a closely linked couple dance that emerged from the fusion of Afro-Rioplatense, gaucho, Latin American, and European dances and rhythms (UNESCO, 2009; Savigliano, 1995; Argentina Ministry of Culture, 2024). It is a characteristic dance of the Río de la Plata region and its area of influence, the city of Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, and it spread throughout the world. It is characterized by the close embrace of the couple, the tango walk, the cut and the ravine, and improvisation. There is a general consensus among scholars that tango was first born as a dance style and then as a musical genre. It was the dance of tango that, since the mid-nineteenth century, promoted a progressive musical transformation that corresponded to the dance, reaching the creation of tango as a musical genre in the last decade of the nineteenth century (TESOL Program, n.d.).

Tango as a dance began to emerge in the middle of the century (Collier et al., 1995) in what were called the shores or suburbs of cities such as Buenos Aires and Montevideo, that is to say, the marginal zones inhabited by the popular sectors. In those suburbs, it was in the heart of the Afro-Rio de la Plata communities, in the final process of liberation from slavery, where the places of dance and popular entertainment were installed, called “academies,” “milongas,” “piringundines,” or “canguelas,” in which tango would be invented. The protagonists were the Afro-Rio de la Plata communities themselves with their so-called “black,” “brown,” and other social types, and the mestizo rural populations in the process of migrating to the cities, called “chinas” and “compatriots,” this last group being an outstanding protagonist in the origin of tango as a dance. In addition, the academies and milongas also received the growing presence of the wave of immigrants from the most diverse countries of Europe and the Middle East, mostly Italians (Savigliano, 1995; Argentina Ministry of Culture, 2024).

José Gobello explains that after the fall of Juan Manuel de Rosas in 1852 in Buenos Aires, the Afro-Buenos Aires communities could not continue marching with their candombes in the street and were forced to do it in closed places. It is in these conditions that the dance is transformed, merging the cuts and broken characteristics of the candombe with the linked couple of the waltz and the mazurka. The waltz had become fashionable in Europe with the novelty of the couple dancing in an embrace in the first decades of the nineteenth century, unleashing strong objections in conservative sectors for its alleged indecency and immorality, especially in England. The mazurka, also linked, was the

fashionable dance in 1850. The fusion of styles gave rise to waltzes and mazurkas danced with cut and broken movements, laying the choreographic foundations of tango: closely linked couple, walk, cut, and broken (TESOL Program, n.d.; Taylor, 1998).

Historical Development of Tango in Buenos Aires

Those characteristics were already defined in the 1860s. In Buenos Aires, there are records of the detention of four men and two women for dancing with a court in 1862. In the following three decades, that type of dance was used in the Rio de la Plata to dance diverse styles: mazurkas, polkas, chaotic, habaneras, Andalusian tangos, and milongas, in search of a style that adapted to its cadence. At that time, everything that "the blacks" danced was called "tango." In that process, a new musical genre was generated, perfectly adapted to that peculiar and sensual dance style. Finally, this new genre appeared in the last years of the 19th century and was baptized with the same name as the dance: "tango" (TESOL Program, n.d.; Collier et al., 1995).

This initial way of dancing tango is known as "tango cayenne," tango rollers, or tango arrabalero. The cayenne tango acquired the profile of a defined style, strongly marked by the cut and the broken, with a very close hug and the bodies in contact. It is a provocative and very sensual style. But as tango was leaving the academies, milongas, and piringundines of the suburban night to begin to be danced in salons and public or family environments, a new style of dancing appeared, which sought to moderate its most provocative aspects, separating the bodies but without losing the embrace and attenuating or even eliminating the cuts and gorges, at least their most sensual figures. This style, developed mainly in the second decade of the twentieth century, received the name lounge tango or smooth tango. Tango de salón or smooth tango was based mostly on the tango walk. It was basically the style that was popularly danced between the 1920s and 1950s (TESOL Program, n.d.; Denniston, 2007).

Almost simultaneously with the salon tango practised as popular entertainment, a tango danced by professionals oriented to the show appeared, which was called the stage tango. The tango scenario uses more daring and free choreographies, often taken from other dances or physical disciplines, such as jumps and figures with loose dancers, which neither the lounge tango nor the tango cayenne accepts. People almost stopped dancing tango from the sixties in Buenos Aires. Some milongas survived. However, in the eighties, it received a new boost thanks to the success of the Argentinian Tango show by Claudio Segovia and Héctor Orezzoli, first in Paris and then on Broadway, generating a tangomanía all over the globe. Everywhere tango academies flourished, and people from all over the world began to make a pilgrimage in search of places to dance, especially Buenos Aires, promoted as the Capital of Tango (Taylor, 1998).

Embrace, Improvisation, and the Technique of Tango Performance

The tango dance is built on four basic components (Denniston, 2007): the narrow embrace, the walk, the cut, and the ravine. These last two classic terms are understood as the axis of improvisation and the choreographic figures that adorn the dance and that are known under the generic name "virulent." But above all things, tango must be danced as a body language through which personal emotions are transmitted to the couple. It is said that tango is danced "listening to the other's body." In tango, the couple must make figures, pauses, and improvised movements, called "cuts, broken and formulates," different for each of them, without letting go. It is the embrace that makes it difficult to combine the improvisations of both in a single choreography. One of the styles of tango, the Argentine tango, performs the miracle of inserting the figure in the link. This is the secret of its success; this is the main innovation that it offers to the world (TESOL Program, n.d.).

The choreography, designed from the couple's embrace, is highly sensual and complex. The complexity of the steps does not diminish the expression or what one wants to convey during the dance. It is about expressing a feeling full of sensuality and not of sexuality, where the main thing is not just the steps or the figures that dancers do with their feet. It is worth noting that perfect technique or perfect timing is insufficient when the facial expressions of the dancers do not convey feelings. Everything in the dance of tango is united: the looks, the arms, the hands, and each movement of the body accompanying the cadence of the tango and what the dancers are living: a three-minute romance between two people who may only know each other and probably do not have a love relationship in real life (TESOL Program, n.d.; Savigliano, 1995).

The tango transcends and reaches the heart of those who contemplate the dancers, thanks to the feelings they put into the dance and, obviously, the quality of their choreography. Each musical verse, each passage, and each tango has different moments; you cannot dance a complete tango following a pattern of identical behavior for the whole melody. There are sad, joyful, sensual, or euphoric cadences, silent or grandiose endings, in-crescendo music or in-diminuendo music; it only expresses feelings, and these are what the dancers carry at their feet and throughout their bodies.

References

Argentina Ministry of Culture. (2024). *Tribute to the African roots of tango*.

Collier, S., Cooper, A., Azzi, M. S., & Martin, R. (1995). *Tango!: The dance, the song, the story*. Thames & Hudson.

Denniston, C. (2007). *The meaning of tango: The story of the Argentinian dance*. Portico.

Savigliano, M. E. (1995). *Tango and the political economy of passion*. Westview Press.

Taylor, J. (1998). *Paper tangos*. Duke University Press.

TESOL Program. (n.d.). *Dancing on the edge: The early tango rules canyengue* (pp. 297–309).

UNESCO. (2009). *Tango*. Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

UNESCO. (n.d.). *Cultural expressions and slave trade abolition*.

Copyright © 2026 Academic Master.