

Argentine Tango Notes

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A Bit of History

The exact origin of Tango cannot be identified. It seems that it has developed through a varied and complex history. It is generally believed to have begun in the mid-1800's in Argentina and Uruguay. There was a massive immigration in Argentina at that time and the intermixing of African, Spanish, Italian, British, Polish, Russian, and Argentinean culture joined together the many different types of music and dancing. It is believed to have developed in the barrios by the poor working society and did not enjoy a world wide spread of popularity until brought to Paris in the early 1900's where it was picked up by the wealthy and began to appear in movies.

Argentine Tango is quite different from Ballroom (International) Tango. The International style of Tango has been standardized through the ballroom schools for many years, while Argentine is based on an improvisational style.

General Technique

Argentine Tango can be immediately identified by its relaxed posture and movement. Contrary to the normal Ballroom hold with hips together and upper bodies held firmly apart with a strong offset frame, Argentine could easier be described as an embrace or hug. Heads are quite close together, with arms loosely wrapped around each other and chests in close contact. The hold can change from very close to open to allow room for lower body movement. Movement is quite fluid with the balance always centered over the weighted foot, allowing an easy change of direction. Probably to allow for progression on a very crowded dance floor! Generally, the ladies head would be gently turned to the right or looking coyly into the man's eyes. The man would also have a lowered head position, looking slightly down and to his left, often checking the floor so that he could quickly block the woman's foot or change her direction.

A man (or the leader) will quite frequently change weight (or transition) without telegraphing his action to the women (or follower). He should make this weight change as transparent as possible so that the woman will not try to follow this action. Due to the improvisational nature of Argentine, this type of transition allows a real freedom for direction changes and position alignments (such as a same foot forward walk).

One action that is quite unique to Argentine Tango is the "collection" of one foot to the other when walking. This is to keep the balance always centered on the weighted foot. Any slow walking movement would always include collecting both feet together before changing weight. Quick movements would have the feet closely passing each other. Even when the man is basically rocking from foot to foot (as in ochos), he would not leave them spread apart, he would collect them before changing weight.



Women would generally walk forward or backward in a straight line, as on a balance beam. This would allow her to easily stop with feet crossed as in the basic or Cruzada step.

In general there is no rise or fall in Argentine Tango and the foot steps are relative flat footed. When ending in a position with both feet together, they would be literally side by side, knees soft, not flexed. Heel leads are generally not used and there is an overall “cat like” movement style.

There is generally much more movement from the waist down, than with the shoulders or heads. In doing ochos, for example, the shoulders remain parallel with the hips twisting to allow the feet to project forward, change weight, collect and then swivel.

Argentine Tango Music

One of the most easily distinguished attributes of Argentine Tango music is the use of the bandoneon. This is a German instrument that looks and sounds like an accordion and an organ. The other thing you will note is the lack of a strong rhythm, since there are generally no drums used. The beat (when there is one!!) is provided by a bass or piano. As you develop a feel for this fascinating music, you will come to enjoy the interesting and unique rhythms.

Common Argentine Terms

A Milonga is the common name for a social event where Argentine tango, both 4/4 count and waltz (Vals or Vals cruzado) are danced. Basically a Tango Dance Party.

Embellishments (or adornos) are done anytime the leader stops. These can include Boleo (foot flick), Gancho (a hooking of the foot either over, under, or around the partner’s leg), Lapiz (drawing a circle on the floor with a toe), or many other foot actions like tapping the toe to the floor.