

## The history of the tango

### A sense of where you were

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### Tango, that “reptile from the brothels”, is making a comeback

TAXI-DRIVERS in Beijing have Mao Zedong as their talisman. In Buenos Aires, Jorge Malcinas has hanging from his rear-view mirror a picture of the late Osvaldo Pugliese, the great bandleader of tango. Indeed, the driver has dozens of pictures of Pugliese to bring him good luck: about the cab, his person and his house. He needs them more than most mortals do, he explains, for he lives a stone's throw from the house of Carlos Menem, Argentina's ex-president, who is widely reckoned to bring “the curse” to anyone with whom he comes into contact. Mr Menem used to be banned from attending matches of both his favourite football team, River Plate, and the national side, because of the perceived ill effects he brings.

Mr Menem himself might usefully seek to have some of Pugliese's powers rub off on him. That is what Juan Domingo Peron, Argentina's flawed if charismatic leader, did. When he returned to power in 1973, Peron begged Pugliese to forgive him for his past mistreatment of him. Pugliese used to wear his pyjamas under his tuxedo in anticipation of arrest, for—perhaps because he was a staunch communist—he liked his creature comforts in jail. Whenever he was in prison, his band would place a red carnation in a bottle on top of his unmanned piano.

On any day of the week, lovers of tango can dance to Pugliese's classic, “La yumba”, in Buenos Aires, Montevideo, New York, London, Madrid, Paris, Amsterdam, Helsinki or Tokyo. Dozens of other cities, including Beijing, hold *milongas*, get-togethers at which both tangos and *milongas* are danced, at least once or twice a week. At these, there is always an itinerant or two—a banker in town to work on some deal, an exchange student, an actor, a mother visiting her daughter—whose passion for tango has led them, perhaps through the Internet, to this spot. No one needs, or wants, to press people on their background. At a *milonga*, it is enough to share this madness for tango.

But what is tango? The commonest description—the vertical expression of a horizontal desire—is the least adequate: that applies to nearly all dances. “A sad thought you can dance”, a comment on the wall of the National Academy of Tango in Buenos Aires, is closer to the mark, though tango was not always a sad or even a nostalgic music, and can certainly be a joyful one. Besides, though Luis Alposta, a poet of tango, is surely right when he says that the tango is “the most beautiful dance in the world for couples”, he is quick to point out that tango has three elements: music and song as well as dance.

**What is tango? “A sad thought you can dance”, say some**

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The lyrics of tango, based on copious use of *lunfardo*, the port-city's hoodlum slang, have grown over the decades to create a vast, chaotic tableau of Buenos Aires life, in a language that is still topical and accessible. The music has a life of its own, too. Ever since Astor Piazzolla, the genius of Argentine music, demanded in the 1950s that people listen rather than dance, plenty of talented musicians have disdained dancers and even singers. Nestor Marconi, perhaps the finest *bandoneon* (concertina) player of the post-Piazzolla generation, says that before Piazzolla, “tango was a music in service to the dance; now it's a music in itself.”

And the elements of the music? One recent afternoon in Buenos Aires, Emilio Balcarse, once one of Pugliese's chief arrangers, is putting a young tango orchestra through “La yumba”. Afterwards, he describes the composition as: “A rhythmic force that develops strikingly to the point where it dissolves into something much more soft. First, a strong sense of rhythm; then everything is much sweeter, more intimate; finally, it's back to the main theme, but with a solo, in this case the violin, inside the rhythmic structure.” That's as good a summing-up of a tango as you can get. Since Piazzolla, however, the classical harmony and counterpoint on which tango was built have been stretched to the limits, with new rhythms and instruments added to the brew.

## Unravelling the secret

Half a century ago, Argentina's greatest writer, Jorge Luis Borges, put his finger on the problem of tango:

The tango can be debated, and we have debates over it, but it still guards, as does all that is truthful, a secret. Dictionaries of music record its short, adequate definition, approved by all: ...[it] promises no difficulties, but the French or Spanish composer who then follows it and correctly 'crafts' a tango is shocked to discover he has constructed something that our ears do not recognise, that our memory does not harbour, and that our bodies reject.

Borges had another insight, which he appears to have borrowed from Oscar Wilde:

Music reveals a personal past which, until then, each of us was unaware of, moving us to lament misfortunes we never suffered and wrongs we did not commit. For myself, I confess that I cannot hear ‘El marne’ or ‘Don Juan’ [two tangos] without remembering in detail an apocryphal past, simultaneously stoic and orgiastic, in which I have challenged and fought, in the end to fall silently in an obscure knife-fight. Perhaps this is the tango's mission: to give Argentines the belief in a brave past, in having met the demands of honour and bravery.

No two people agree about the origins of tango. The only thing about the tango that can be stated with conviction, Borges says, is that it was born in the brothels. Hence the lascivious movements, the suggestive titles—“El choclo” (the corn-cob), “El fierrazo” (the iron rod), and the way pairs of men would dance the tango on street corners, since the women of the neighbourhood were repelled by its debauchery. But Ricardo Garcia Blaya, a contemporary writer on tango, says of the brothel theory that “nothing is more absurd and incorrect.” Tango, he insists, was born in the dance halls; there, polkas and waltzes also had suggestive names.

One dominant camp says that the tango was accepted by the upper classes of Buenos Aires only after the dance had been taken up with passion, just before the first world war, in Paris, and that the Vatican lifted a ban on the dance only after Pius X himself had been treated to a demonstration. Complete fabrications, say several modern historians. As for the word itself, some say “tango” comes from an African word, *tambo*, meaning a gathering place for slaves and freed blacks to dance; others say it comes from the Spanish *fandango*; yet others have entirely different explanations.

Since everyone has a claim to know the origins of tango, *The Economist* will not be left out. In 1880, Buenos

Aires had a population of 210,000. By 1910 that number had nearly sextupled, to 1.2m. It was to Buenos Aires that new railroads brought livestock off the vast pampas, to be slaughtered and refrigerated in the (mainly English) meat-packing plants, and then shipped out around the world. These boom-days brought European immigrants—chiefly Italians, Spaniards, French and Germans—in droves to settle on the edge of the city. (The history of Buenos Aires, Bruce Chatwin once said, lies in its telephone directory.) The fencing off of the pampas, and the mechanisation of livestock transport, brought displaced gauchos, or cowboys, to the same urban fringes. The immigrants, uprooted from their home continent, and the gauchos, uprooted in their own country, met and blended in a new town they soon embraced as their own. The music they made together managed to sing at once of a sense of loss and of a deep attachment. Nostalgia and sentimentality: two strands of tango.

## Cowboys, blacks and payadores

The gauchos brought with them their guitars and their *musica criolla* of essentially Spanish origin: *habañeras*, *fandangos*, *milongas*, *vidalitas* and *cifras*. The new immigrants brought their ability to read and write music, a broader array of instruments, and Italian opera traditions. At some stage the *bandoneon* arrived, an impossible instrument (“a chaos”, says Mr Balcarse), with four registers and little order to its buttons. Yet, somehow, this German instrument for playing hymns was subverted into something diabolically expressive. “You can play tango without the *bandoneon*,” says Leopoldo Federico, one of the surviving great musicians of tango’s golden era in the 1940s and 1950s, “but the history, roots and direction of tango are inconceivable without it.”

Argentine blacks may also have thrown their influence into the mix with the *candombe*—the only Rio Plata dance that clearly has African, and even Indian, rhythms—and the *milonga*, a jaunty, 2/4 music which to this day is danced to add variety to a languid stream of tangos. But the black influence is hard to gauge, for few remain in the city today. Many were sent to fight in the genocidal campaigns against the Indians, in the Paraguayan war of the late 1860s and in the civil war of a decade later; others left for Montevideo, in Uruguay. Chatwin was not entirely right: today, Buenos Aires is a whiter city than almost any in Europe.

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**Today, tango is  
reviving again**

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Gradually the tango spread from the urban fringes, through the suburbs, to the centre of Buenos Aires. It was helped on its way by *payadores*—itinerant singers with barrel-organs, whose shocking notes must have wafted through the windows of more respectable, but grateful, homes—by the dance halls that sprang up, and, for those who insist, perhaps by the brothels. At the start of the first world war, tango was on its way to pushing out other popular styles of dance. Between 1903 and 1910, over 1,000 records were released in Buenos Aires, a third of them tangos. In the next decade, 5,500 records were issued, half of them tangos.

Today, tango is reviving again. “Throughout its history you hear that tango is finished,” says Daniel Melingo, one of a younger generation of tango musicians. “People talk as if it’s their own youth that’s over.” And that attitude, he says, is what feeds tango’s nostalgia, which in turn generates new expressions of dance, music and song.

Adriana Varela, a powerful female vocalist of tango, says that Buenos Aires is a city that too often turns its back on the vast Rio Plata. “But whenever it turns round to face the river that shaped it, the city rediscovers everything that touches the people of Buenos Aires. My job is to take what the great poets of Buenos Aires have wrought, and to convey the landscape to which I belong.” Tango is a sense of place more than it is a set of musical rules. As Borges put it long ago:

We might say that without the evenings and nights of Buenos Aires, a tango cannot be made, and that in heaven there awaits us Argentines the Platonic idea of the tango, its universal form.