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The Popularity of Argentine Tango

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Tango music is not a genre that is considered mainstream in America's daily culture. In Argentina however, tango music has had many time periods of great popularity and controversy both socially and politically. Tango originated in cultural centers such as Buenos Aires and Montevideo and grew as more immigrants traveled to Argentina. This music became more popular with time and with the great influx of brothels and dance clubs in the early 1900s. With the popularity of tango being in brothels, a certain clientele of thugs and gangsters became associated with the music. These men would come together in groups to practice the complex dances that grew from tango. These dances expressed machismo or extreme masculinity of the men dancing as well as their intense sexual desire.

The roots of tango music lie in the immigrant culture of Argentina. The large cities of Buenos Aires and Montevideo housed the largest number of immigrants in Argentina and therefore were the centers of tango's birth. Like most genres of music, tango began with a small group of listeners and performers known as "Guardia Vieja" or the "Old Guard." These first generation players of tango music established the basis of what has become a very popular genre today. These early players were generally of lower class and as with other genre's beginnings; the music did not spread quickly at first. "The first generation of tango musicians – not to mention tango dancers – is extremely shadowy."<sup>1</sup> The spread of tango however can be accredited to those affluent people of the time, which heard the music and fell in love with it. As these affluent people came to enjoy the music and dance, and even began to listen to the music and

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<sup>1</sup> Collier, Simon, et al. Tango. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1995.

perform the dances publicly, they undermined the efforts of the upper-class to restrict the influence of the new music, and allowed tango to flourish on a national level and eventually internationally.

Tango incorporates characteristics of waltz music as well as blending many other cultural styles. Instrumentation of early tango music included the flute, violin, and harp, as well as guitars and clarinets. Later however, the use of an accordion or bandonéon, and the portable organ became apart of the instrumentation. Tango traditionally is played by a sextet or a six piece band using two violins, a double bass, a piano, and two bandonéons. A bandonéon is much like a typical accordion in the fact that it has two wooden ends with buttons on them as well as a compression center that squeezes air through reeds that are opened and closed by the buttons on the ends. It is this instrumentation that creates the unique sound that tango is renowned for internationally today.

Early tango dancing began naturally, as soon as the music started becoming popular as the popularity of tango music began to grow. Like the music, tango dancing was derived mostly from the waltz dance. In addition however, many various African dances have influenced the form of the now well known tango. Two dances of African and European origins have also generated some influence on the tango. The slow dance called Habanera generated much of the slow, sexual pieces of the tango dance while the faster Milonga generated the fast jerky motions. The combination of these dances being mixed together, created a quick but sexual dance that caught the attention of people

throughout the world. While all of these dances influenced the popularity and eventual form of the tango dance, the dance symbolizes the people and times in which it originated.<sup>2</sup> These people were all of various ethnicities and backgrounds much like the dance and music. These people found comfort and freedom in the dance and playing of the tango.

Once popular, tango went through a series of popularity shifts and cultural changes throughout time in Argentina's history. Tango was very popular during the rise of the Radical Party under Hipolito Yrigoyen and during his regime. As Argentine President from 1916 until 1922, and again from 1928 until 1930, Yrigoyen pushed the establishment of a popular democracy through the use of free elections. It was during the time of this presidency that many films were created that featured the tango and aided in the popularization of the music and dance.<sup>3</sup> These films were all created in Argentina as an effort to further spread the tango around the world. These films popularity laid in the need of entertainment for returning European soldiers as they tried to suppress their memories and assimilate back into mainstream society. Not only did these films entertain these soldiers but allowed them to learn new social styles and gave them a new hobby or interest to pursue if they so desired. Many of these soldiers were soon found in dancehalls and clubs learning and dancing the tango avidly.

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<sup>2</sup> Buenosaires, Oscar De. Not Just Tango: Classical Music in Argentina. Albuquerque: FOG Publications, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Thompson, Robert Farris. Tango : The Art History of Love. New York: Pantheon Books, 2005.

With the end of World War I, a new craze for dancing and music swept across Europe and South America and the tango was just what was needed. Tango dancehalls and clubs became packed from morning until night with many bands playing daily. European countries largely responsible for popularity of tango were England, Germany and France. These countries were home to many popular tango artists such as Quintin Verdu, Juan Llosas, Francisco Canaro, Osvaldo Fresedo, and the Pizarro Brothers.<sup>4</sup>

During the continuation of the Yrigoyen regime, the popularity of tango in Argentina was in the cabaret industry of Buenos Aires. This was unlike Paris and other European centers that had embraced tango, in the fact that these cabarets in Argentina were melting pots of men and women of all different social classes. This not only eliminated the implications of class and gender that remained so prominent throughout the world, but allowed these people to appreciate the music and dance for its simple pleasures. The elimination of these societal labels also allowed for women and men of poor social standings to rise through those barriers and be appreciated, and even famous in some cases, for their amazing ability that lied in tango.

During the era of depression that followed his overthrow, tango music declined and became a fading genre of dance and music. This changed however, with the rise of Juan Peron in the 1940's. Tango once again came back as a dance and music of cultural definition and national pride for the people of Argentina. This phase of popularity was fueled by the federally funded production *La Historia Del Tango* which celebrated the cultural beauty of tango music in Argentina.

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<sup>4</sup> Collier, pp. 47.

Juan Peron held his presidency of Argentina from 1946 until 1955 and again from 1973 until 1974. It was during the Peronist period of government that intense labor changes occurred and with these reforms came unions and collections of workers to fight employers for higher wages and benefits. With this, musicians and professional dancers began to make money of notable proportions, all while pursuing their love of tango. Once again, unlike other places in the world, Argentina allowed people of a lower class to rise through social boundaries due to their great abilities in tango music and dance.

The popularity of tango began to fall in the 1950's. This unfortunate decline in popularity was due to the overthrow of Peron, and the state of decay that brought about the country. With the countries sources becoming depleted and the military in full force throughout the entire country of Argentina, music and dance took a backseat to survival and politics in many citizens' daily lives. Tango café's closed as well as cabarets and sports clubs that all once housed many tango events and concerts.

The return of Juan Peron in the 1970's brought on a revival of tango as well as the emersion of many solo tango artists like Astor Piazzolla. Piazzolla has been labeled as a pioneer of the new tango known as avant-garde tango. Just as the word means, avant-garde tango was a new and interesting technique of performing the same type of song and dance as had been done for decades. This new technique used the same basic instrumentation, but enlarged the number of violins to four as well as the number of bandonéons. Another bass was added to balance the low sounds of the music. This allowed for a bigger, bolder sound, that more accurately accompanied the feelings and

frustrations of the Argentine people, who had suffered under many dictators and military coups by the late 1970's and 1980's.

During the 1990's many artists came forward in an attempt to establish dancing and musical groups to revive and retain the original excitement and beauty of tango. In 1990, dancers Miguel Angel Zotto and Milena Plebs founded the "Tango X 2" Company. This group gave young people a chance to learn the tango and aide in the effort to spread its natural beauty to the newer generations of today. In creating this group, Zotto and Plebs generated a style that exhibits the traditional technique used by dancers from its beginnings. With groups such as these, many continue to spread and carry the popularity of tango throughout the world.

As with all genres of music, tango underwent many stages of popularity. Through its beginnings in the lower-class and deprived sections of Buenos Aires and the immigrants that lived there, to the well known status that tango has today, the people behind the music continued to shape and express themselves through the music they loved. Tango produced a national and cultural unification factor for Argentineans that held a nation together under many times of social and political unrest and continues to unify and accredit Argentina today.



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