
Tango Isn't Tango—A comparison of Argentine Versus American/International Tango

by Bill Morrison

If you know International or American Tango, you will see Argentine Tango as a completely new dance. This article will have a brief history of the evolution of Tango, its music, and then highlight some of the differences between Argentine Tango and International/American Tango.

One of the main differences between Argentine Tango and any other couple dance I have encountered is that the lead is responsible for leading every weight change! As such, there aren't patterns, per se (step here on 1, here on 2, here and here on 3 &, . . .). The leader may begin a sequence of movement and then add pauses, accelerate/decelerate steps, add/remove weight changes, change direction, add/remove rotation, or even go into a different movement at any time, as they are led by the music. This is very different from any other pattern-based ballroom dance, as Argentine Tango is very interpretive.

History

In the 1800s, Argentina had a large immigrant population from Europe and Africa. With this mix of cultures, the music and the dance formed in salons (bars and clubs). Then in the early 1900s, the local dance found its way back to Europe where it was "refined" (specifically in Paris). This became the "International" style which was exported to the rest of Europe and the United States. In the United States, Arthur Murray simplified International Tango for mass consumption, resulting in the American Tango.

Music

All Tango music comes from a mixture of cultures, including Africa, India, France, Spain, and Latin America. The music then split with the influence of formalization of the dance in Europe. As American Tango is derived from International, it shares the same music style.

International/American Tango music has a stronger beat (more rhythmic with a steady drum beat), sometimes even being forceful, and is typically played by a large group or orchestra. Argentine Tango music is softer (more melodic, with typically a light or no percussive beat) and is more flowing, and is played by a small band or combo, or sometimes a single bandoneon (similar to accordion) player with a couple of accompanying instruments.

Posture, Carriage, and Frame

International/American Tango:

- The couple frame is very similar to a traditional ballroom frame and couple alignment, except for the following distinctions.
 - There is slightly more offset, allowing the leader's right arm to be positioned farther around the follower's back (fingertips resting on the spine).

- The follower places their left forearm underneath the leader's elbow and upper arm, palm facing inward, with the fingers just reaching the leader's torso.

- The leader's left and follower's right elbow may be held slightly higher than normal, with a more acute angle at the elbow.

- The couple frame is typically fixed, as with other ballroom dances.
- Contra-body movement (CBM) is standard as in other dancers.

Argentine Tango:

- Not as offset as International/American Tango, but the leader's right arm is still positioned farther around the follower's back, with fingertips resting on the spine.
- Uses an "A-Frame" frame.

- Each dancer uses a "lean into the wind" posture, so their heads and torsos are closer to each other than hips with feet the farthest apart, with the rest of the frame being similar to ballroom closed frame/posture.

In traditional milongas (social dance) however, especially in Buenos Aires, the frame is taken to the extreme of balance, where dancers are "on the body" (apilado)—dancers actually lean against each other, with chests in contact, and the follower's arm extending behind the leader's neck.

- Given the forward lean, the weight is more on the front of the ball of the foot.

- Hand and arm positions are similar to other club dances, being relaxed and rounded.

- While offset, the follower is not in strict parallel to the lead, but at a slight rotation—more of a "one o'clock" position relative to the leader. Unlike ballroom, the follower's gaze should be slightly to the right.
- The frame is not fixed, as there is lateral (side-to-side) and axial (farther-closer) play, allowing for accommodation of various movements.

Lead/Follow, Footwork, Rhythms and Patterns

Ballroom Tango:

- Lead movement is done with the torso, with the dancer standing straight and knees slightly bent, as with a standard ballroom frame.
- Stride is typically a heel-lead, and may be longer or emphasized, similar to other ballroom dance forms.
- The lead is usually strong.
- The lead is structured, meaning that as a movement commences, it is part of a standard pattern from the dance syllabus.

- Movements are usually full-bodied, moving from the foot and leg, up into the body.
- May incorporate open breaks/pivots/turns, and other open position movements, not found in Argentine Tango.
- There is a formal syllabus of patterns, for both the lead and follow.
- The basic rhythm is slow, slow, quick, quick, slow (T-A-NG-O), with slow's taking one beat and quicks taking half a beat (rhythm: 1,2,3&4). If the music is fast, the rhythm may be doubled, slowing down the dance: 1(2),3(4),5,6,7(8). (*Note: Numbers in parens are part of the slow*).
- As with other ballroom dances, movement starts with the leads left foot/followers right.
- The basic pattern is (from the lead's perspective): forward, forward, forward (collect right foot)-side (right), collect left foot (no weight change).
- The dance is more showy/flashy, with embellishments common at the upper levels of expertise.

Argentine Tango

- There is no basic rhythm or pattern. There is no concept of a codified pattern which one goes through from beginning to end in a defined rhythm. Some instructors, though, may teach a basic for the benefit of students who are used to learning a "basic" for a dance form. If you have to have a basic concept, it is walking—with attitude.
- The leader leads every weight change! The lead is unstructured, in that it is very interpretational. As led by the music, the leader is at their liberty to add pauses of any duration, change direction, add/remove weight changes, or change from one movement to go into something else, at any time.
- The follower must not anticipate at any time, and embellishments kept to a minimum and only when permitted by the leader. In fact, some embellishments are led (ganchos, belleos, etc.). When doing embellishments, unless performing an exhibition, the embellishment should be subdued and the foot kept on, or at least close to the floor.
- The lead may start on either foot. This is set up by the lead doing some initial sways to get the follower to have weight on the desired foot.
- Movement is kept in the foot and leg, and does not move up into the body. The feet, ankles, and legs may brush those of your partner.
- The foot is glided along the floor, and is not lifted and placed. It is not uncommon for the toe to be placed before the heel.
- CBM is not strict in Argentine Tango. It is not uncommon for there to be some spiral (twist in the torso) that is opposite to CBM.
- Body isolation is key in Argentine Tango. The introduction of spiral (twist/rotation in the torso) does not indicate a change in direction! If the lead wants to change direction, they will increase the spiral until it is reflected in the hips, which indicates the new direction.
- Typically, steps are modest with the lead typically subtle, including slight variations in rotation, acceleration, and distance to indicate what is being led. There is no "drive" like there is in ballroom dances.
- Lead movement is done with the upper torso and shoulders. Knees are always slightly bent. There is no rise and fall, but for some movements, there is a downward settling, to indicate a pause, to create space, to accommodate a lengthened step, or to indicate the completion of a movement.
- It is not uncommon for the brushing of the feet of the partner. This is sometimes taken to be extreme where the lead may use their foot/leg to displace the foot/leg of the follower to either induce a rotation or an extended leg movement.