

Sound, Movement and People: Combining Digital and Choreomusicological Research Methods for the Exploration of Tango Argentino

Abstracts of the Panel presented at the 44th ICTM World Conference, Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick, 13-19 July 2017

“The Tango-Danceability of Music in European Perspective” is the title of a four-year research project sponsored by the FWF (Austrian Science Fund), hosted at the Institute of Ethnomusicology, University of Music and Performing Arts, Graz. Within this project, the cosmopolitan genre Tango Argentino is examined, with particular focus on its history and manifestation in Europe, as well as its ongoing interconnections to Buenos Aires (Argentina).

Three main aspects of the genre are explored: dance, music, and social structures. Each aspect is analyzed in-depth, and studied on its own, but, moreover, included into the analysis are also the relations between these three elements. Consequently, the broad objective of the project is to determine which factors in sound, movement, and social relations are relevant to the question of “tango-danceability.” A particular focus of this project is the use of digital technology for choreomusicological purposes. Movement and sound analysis are supported by computer-aided methods, including quantitative data analysis and motion capturing. Important for the layout of this project is that these digital possibilities are not applied as a means in themselves. Instead, computer-aided analysis methods are seen and used as a tool to gain better insights into ethnochoreological, ethnomusicological, and also choreomusicological research questions.

For a better overview, the three main aspects sound, movement, and people are addressed separately in this panel. The first presentation gives a general introduction to Tango Argentino, including its social structures in history and presence, with a particular focus on Italian influences. The second presentation explores musical phenomena determining the danceability of tango, based on results from the first phase of the project. Finally, the third speaker will focus on the movement analysis of Tango Argentino with motion capture, presenting first results from the ongoing research.

Mattia Scassellati (University of Music and Performing Arts Graz)

European influences on the formation and manifestation of cosmopolitan tango in Argentina

The period from end of the 19th century to the beginning of World War I was when many European migrants came to Argentina. Most of them were from Italy and settled down in Buenos Aires, leaving behind poverty and squalor. Here, migrants from a variety of differing music and dance cultures were living in close proximity, leading to both experimentation with other traditions and an urge to preserve traditions that were considered their own. Under these social conditions, the phenomenon of tango argentino began to take shape. During the second decade of the 20th century, after tango had started to become an integral part of Argentinean society, it made its way from Argentina to Paris and from there to European capitals and other large cities. This led to the creation of new tango music and dance styles and new fashions and trends.

Subsequently, the reception of European tango back in Argentina and the response of European

dancers to tango music and dance affected the way tango was perceived and developed in its country of origin. In this presentation, I will show that the cosmopolitan music and dance form of today called tango argentino is the product of active back-and-forth interaction between Europe and Argentina that began in the 20th century and is still going on. The historical focus of my presentation will be on the role that Europe, and in particular Italian migration, had on tango argentino's process of formation. In addition, I will offer insights into current social network structures linking tango communities in Europe as well as across the Atlantic, shedding light on how the cosmopolitan scene structures provide a basis for the interdependence of tango argentino practice in Buenos Aires and localized European tango communities.

Kendra Stepputat (University of Music and Performing Arts Graz)

Musical Features that determine tango danceability—reviewing research methods and results

Within the popular genre Tango Argentino, many different styles of dance and music exist. Some kinds of tango music are meant for dancing, while others are explicitly composed for listening to in a concert situation. Similarly, tango dancing can be in the form of staged performances or improvised social dancing. All of these tango music and dance styles are considered Tango Argentino, and rightfully so.

In order to find out about the active relation and mutual influence music and dance in tango have on each other, this project focuses in particular on tango music that was composed and performed for socially danced Tango Argentino, and that is actually and actively danced to by those in the present-day cosmopolitan Tango Argentino scene. Several publications have dealt with Tango Argentino music in a most profound analytic way (e.g., Salgán 2001, Peralta 2008, Krüger 2012, Link/Wendland 2016). It is therefore relatively easy to determine the musical factors that make music sound like Tango Argentino. But the question remains: what differentiates a danceable tango from a non-danceable one—in the eyes of a social tango dancer? In other words, what are the essential structural factors in Tango Argentino music that make it particularly suitable for improvisational, social tango dancing?

To determine this, a complex research design has been set up, one that makes use of a broad range of research methods, complementing each other. This includes qualitative analysis of tango music pieces that are considered particularly danceable by members of the international tango dance scene, quantitative data collection and evaluation, experimental music test designs, and, last but not least, participant observation. In this presentation I will outline the research setup, explain objectives and methods, and give an insight into selected, significant results towards an answer to which features make music tango danceable.

Christopher Dick (University of Music and Performing Arts Graz)

The digital in the dance – Computer based movement analysis in the case of Tango Argentino

When trying to understand dance, movement analysis is an established approach to gain insight into its motional structures. The techniques for capturing and analysis are diverse and have changed over time. With Motion Capture technology we are able to examine movement on a very fine level of granularity, imperceptible for the naked eye. In the case of Tango Argentino, this allows to capture and understand the intricate motional patterns characteristic for this improvisational couple dance. Tight control over the different body parts is an important factor expressing the distinct motional quality of the dance by means such as certain patterns of acceleration, balance shifts, dissociation and turns as opposed to predefined routines with space consuming step patterns.

The detailed information thereby collected on the level of milliseconds and millimeters can be used for various approaches of analysis: it can be evaluated statistically, both macro and micro structures; it can be visualised in a multitude of forms for example as a digital reconstruction of human bodies. The important factor in this research however is the connection of movement and music analysis, bringing together the two important constituents of Tango Argentino. By analysing not only one part or the other, we can find how dancers embody the music and what musical parameters may define the dancing movements.

The paper will present preliminary results of this ongoing movement study with a focus on the connection between tango music and the execution of basic Tango Argentino walking and turning. Above that, the design and setup of the capturing trials will be shown to discuss the advantages and problems arising in using Motion Capture in a choreomusicological setting. On this basis, it demonstrates how and to what extent new digital methods can be of help in many of the current research questions of our field.