Choose Your Own Adventure:
Tango Music Edition

Jackie Pham
DJ Workshop
March 30th, 2024
Yale Tango Festival
A milonga consists of cycles of music

- There are multiple cycles in a milonga – each with a different feel
- Each milonga feels different (e.g., afternoon vs. evening, Fri/Sat/Sun)

➤ Why care about the order of music?
Understanding music flow empowers us to maximize our enjoyment of tango

- Gain more agency over your enjoyment
  - Get to know tango more deeply through different angles
  - Shape how you engage with the music, other dancers, and your environment
  - Shape the music as a DJ
  - Help others enjoy tango more!

- Helpful for all — anyone can become a DJ!
Understanding the music helps us find flow

- In tango, we are all trying to find flow
- Flow is a state of peak performance, where our skills match the challenge of the activity at hand
  - Heightened positive emotions
  - Reduced self-awareness and self-doubt
  - Altered time perception and total immersion in the activity
  - See Mihály Csíkszentmihályi below

(A) Framework of Tango Music and DJing

The broader your foundation, the bigger pyramid you can build
Milestones to guide your journey

• Discovering Music
  – Guiding your exploration
  – Music resources

• Organizing Music
  – Curating libraries (mental and digital)
  – Tandas and arcs

• Playing Music
  – General tips
  – Active DJing: cycles and flow
  – Mixing traditional, modern, alternative, and beyond
Discovering Music
Build your memory palace – start with what you love

➢ Reflection: What type of music do you like to listen to? Dance to?

• Ask a DJ / find a mentor to help you explore

• Your library is both mental and digital
  – Big 4 orchestras: Di Sarli, D’Arienzo, Pugliese, Troilo
  – Eras: late ‘20s – mid ‘50s
  – Genres: traditional, modern, nuevo, alternative, etc
Find what you love and follow it

Source: posted to TDJF – Tango DJ Forum on Facebook, original source unknown
Find what OTHER people love, and follow it

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<th>Votes for Favorite</th>
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The Big 4

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Source: Informal poll of tango DJ Facebook groups (Club de Musicalizadores de Tango FELIX PICHERRA, some Musicalizadoras) and an online TDJ course by Instituto Argentino del Tango
Orchestras and Music History Resources

• Local and visiting DJs
  – Shout-outs to DJs who teach and publish educational materials: Robin Thomas, Tine Herreman, Dan Boccia, Jay Abling, and Ayano Yoneda and Felipe Martinez (tangopoetryproject.com)

• Deeper dive books:
  – Michael Lavocah books (Tango Stories, Musical Secrets + deep dives on Troilo, Di Sarli, Pugliese, D’Arienzo, and Fresedo)
  – David Thomas: Get to Know Twenty Tango Orchestras

• Any tango musician, especially those who dance
• Dancers/musicians who teach music theory for dancing:
  – Horacio Godoy, Murat Erdemsel, Korey Ireland, Alex Krebs
Music Discovery and Acquisition Resources

• Discovery:
  – Spotify (good source of free discovery)
  – YouTube (for rare recordings)
  – SoundCloud, other music publishing platforms

• Acquisition:
  – Digital: TangoTunes, ToTango.net, no.7digital.com, Quobuz.com, Amazon (variable quality), Apple Music (purchase DRM-free tracks), others
  – CDs (some rare tracks only available on Japanese CDs)
  – Vinyl, shellac
  – Older DJs clearing out their CD collections
  – Generous DJs who share their digital collections
Organizing Music
Organize your memory palace (mental and digital) according to what makes sense to YOU

➢ Reflection: How do you think about your music?

• The specific framework of your library does not matter, as long as you have a framework

• Example: Type (TVM), orchestra, singer, year, personal classifications (e.g., lyrical vs. rhythmic, happy / sad / romantic / nostalgic / dramatic / stormy, Major/minor)

• Demo in Traktor
Tandas are “rooms” in your memory palace and contain different arcs that you can connect for different flows

• Typical tandas consist of 4-song tangos and 3-songs vals and milongas
  – For faster partner rotation: 3-song tangos
  – Unusual but gaining popularity with some DJs: 4-song vals and milonga tandas

• Start with what you love and create (aurally) cohesive tandas
  – Start strong, end strong!
  – Create arcs using your classifiers

➢ Be flexible: mix-and-match tandas to create different arcs and flows
Arcs within and between tandas shape our experiences in a milonga

- Balance **kinetic** and **emotional** energy to keep dancers engaged; too much of anything will exhaust dancers
- Mentoring and camaraderie are the keys to thriving: seek feedback and support from fellow DJs you trust
- **Demo in Traktor**
Playing Music: Cycles and Flow
Listening and presence are critical to DJing well

• The quality and care of your DJing is independent from the number of dancers in the room
  – Play for everyone present for that moment – you are dancing with everyone in the room
  – Energy off the dance floor feeds the ronda, not the other way around
  – You can play anything, so long as you can build up to and recover from it

• Actively DJ: be ready to adapt to and guide the room
  – Build arcs between your tandas and within your cycles
  – Play a good mix of something for everyone – balance different styles, moods, and energies
  – Afternoon and evening milongas have different vibes and periods throughout the event
Jackie’s personal DJing tips

• Strategies for starting and ending a milonga:
  – Start and end the milonga on time: check in with hosts/organizers ~30 mins prior to end
  – If there is a pre-milonga class or event, arrive early to observe and gauge energy
  – Optional: play transition or intro music
  – 3-tanda stem to observe and gauge the room, then adjust
  – Decide how you want to end the milonga, and play outro music

• Professional tips:
  – Mentoring and camaraderie: find your support network + give support!
  – Collaborate with the hosts/organizers to set a distinct tone or intention
  – Periodically walk the room to check sound quality throughout the space
Considerations when mixing genres

• Traditional:
  – Pros: more familiar to most dancers, good to ground and align the room
  – Cons: too much can become boring and dull to the ears, some head-scratching songs

• Modern:
  – Pros: refreshing and clean sound, familiar songs and orchestrations are danceable
  – Cons: too much can be aurally overwhelming. Watch out for piercing treble, rumbling bass, super-fast tempos, and huuuuuuuuge, challenging tempo changes

• Alternative:
  – Pros: clean sound with clear rhythmic backbone, more relatable to newer dancers
  – Cons: can be overly emotional or dramatic, rhythm can become repetitive, too much of one style can be emotionally and physically draining
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Thank you! Let’s discuss!

Remember: There are no stupid questions, only stupid answers
Technical considerations grow with your aspirations and need for stability and reliability

- **Music players:**
  - iTunes / Apple Music (some stability issues)
  - Embrace (requires iTunes)
  - Traktor, Serrato, VirtualDJ, other DJ software ($$$, overpowered but helpful for stability/reliability for more professional aspirations)
  - Spotify, YouTube, other digital streaming services (Not recommended except for zero-stakes experimentation)

- **Hardware:**
  - **Reliable headphones or earbuds** + optional auxiliary music player for pre-listening
  - **Audio cables:** RCA-to-3.5mm (must), 3.5mm-to-3.5mm (must), RCA-to-RCA (rare), ¼ inch and XLR cables (more rare, but useful for higher-impact gigs)
  - **Backup music player** (heaven forbid your main device ever dies mid-set!!!)
  - Optional: DACs and external sound cards
  - Optional: Software-specific equalizers and mixers (e.g., Traktor, Serrato)

- **Miscellaneous:**
  - Adapters (1/4 inch, 3.5mm, USB-C, Lightning – have the latter 2 adapters esp if you are DJing with performers)
  - Flash drive (USB-A at minimum, USB-C can be helpful)
  - Gaffers tape (tears easily and leaves no residue – unlike duct tape)
  - Power strip
  - Power bank (for outdoor / battery-powered events)