

Social Tango

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Argentine tango has been popular around the world for over a century. Therefore it has evolved into several different forms. This doc describes **social** tango, sometimes called American tango.

The world first saw tango when Argentine dancers brought it to Paris around 1910. It quickly became the biggest news in Paris—the 1912 *Tangomania*. Dancers around the world fell in love with tango and added it to their growing repertoire of social dances. When we compare 1912 European and North American tango descriptions to Argentine tango manuals from the same time, we see that the northern hemisphere dancers mostly got it right, dancing the same steps in the same style as the Argentines.

Then as time went on, social dancers had no reason to change it. It wasn't broken, so why fix it? Today's social tango is essentially the continuation of the original 1912 Argentine tango. There have been a few evolutionary changes over time, like which foot to start on, but they're relatively minor compared to the greater changes that have been made to the other two forms of tango.

Ironically, some people call this *American Style* tango. This is to differentiate it from *International Style* (British) tango, but it's nevertheless odd to call the nearly-unchanged original Argentine tango "American," unless one means *South American*.

Many dancers in the world know social tango so this is worth learning. That doesn't mean it's "better" than the other forms of tango—that depends on one's personal preference. But social tango is a very useful kind of tango for dancing with friends at parties, weddings and ocean cruises.

Tango Frame, Posture and Style

Tango posture is comfortably erect. There is some of the Latin "air under the armpits," not rounded shoulders or elbows collapsed down at your side. Think Flamenco. Brace away from your partner slightly more than you would in swing or waltz, but with soft comfortable hands.

Many tango dancers favor a lowered body, with knees slightly flexed. Lower your body just a half-inch, and remain at this slightly lowered level while dancing, instead of bobbing up and down as you walk. Walking style is smooth, almost like a prowling cat. An early tango description said, "Imitate the sinuous grace of the tiger."

There is much debate among teachers over heel lead, versus flat foot, versus walking on the ball of the foot. Each has its fervent proponents, and each will have their reasons to justify their preference.

Our preference is a powerful stance but with weight a bit forward, on the ball of the foot, because it is stealthier and more balanced. But that's only our preference. Choose the style that feels the best to you.

Tango is a dance of individual expression. Teachers may make stylistic suggestions, but we don't think they should dictate their students' style. Ever since the earliest days in Buenos Aires, tango has been a dance of individuality.

Tango Steps

We begin with a four-part **practice sequence**. Leading and following tango can be tricky, so sometimes it's best to start with a memorized pattern, to become familiar with the steps and style, before moving on to the more challenging dynamics of partnering.

Part 1 - Promenades

Take closed promenade position and face toward the center of the room.

Promenade forward with 2 slow steps, Lead beginning left foot and Follow right foot. Continue forward with two quick running steps. Finish with a slow step forward, stopping on this step, and changing to reverse promenade position, with the Lead's left arm around his partner and the Follow's right hand on her partner's shoulder, clasping opposite hands. The timing is slow-slow-quick-quick-slow.

Promenade with the same pattern back to place, beginning on the opposite foot, Lead's right and Follow's left. Add as much drama as you wish.

Part 2 - Left and Right Fans

Take closed dance position, with the Lead facing Line of Dance and the Follow backing against LOD.

The Lead walks forward, as the Follow backs up, taking 2 slow steps. Then the Follow steps back right foot diagonally toward the center of the room as the Lead steps forward left foot, rotating as a couple 90° counterclockwise. Facing in toward the center of the room, the Lead takes a long side step right toward LOD as the Follow takes a shorter side step left. Both close feet together without taking weight. The timing is slow-slow-quick-quick-slow.

Taking closed promenade position, facing against LOD, Promenade forward 2 slow steps, with the Lead starting to pass in front of his partner on the second step. Then he steps with his left foot across in front of her, squarely facing back at her, as she steps right foot forward, aimed between his feet. Continue to rotate as a couple through a 180° clockwise turn as the Follow takes a long side step L, facing into the center, and the Lead takes a shorter side step R. Both close feet together without taking weight. The timing is slow-slow-quick-quick-slow.

Part 3 - Tango Chassé

Promenade toward LOD with 2 slow steps, then face partner squarely and take a side step toward LOD, then close the trailing foot *with* weight. The timing is slow-slow-quick-quick. Repeat this phrase once, slow-slow-quick-quick. Finish the 8-count pattern with a False-Step Corte: take a side step toward LOD, still facing partner squarely, then replace weight back on the rear foot, keeping your first foot free at the end.

Part 4 - Tango Lunge

Promenade five steps toward LOD, dipping your inside knee to the floor on the last step. The timing is slow-slow-quick-quick-slow. The quick steps are forward running steps, like Part 1, not a side-close as in Part 3. If your knees aren't in shape to drop completely to the floor, you may suggest to your partner that you only sway forward, only dropping down halfway. Style hint: Keep your head up as you lunge to the floor. There is often a tendency to let one's head and shoulders collapse when lunging.

Push *back* up to rise, during the next 2 slow counts. Then do a Turning Corte: the Follow steps back right foot diagonally as the Lead takes a small step forward on his left foot, rotating as a couple 90° counterclockwise, the Lead takes a long side step right as the Follow takes a shorter side step left, both close feet together without taking weight, facing into the center of the room. The timing is quick-quick-slow.

This four-part sequence can be repeated.

Break Up the Sequence

You can lead and follow sections of the practice sequence in random order.

The Fan

The Basic Tango Step

Tango doesn't have to be hard. One way to make it easier is to have a Basic Step. You can begin with this familiar step, repeat it, and do a few easy variations on this theme.

There are six basic versions of the Fan. Dancers and teachers have different preferences, about which one is the best beginning step, but all six are fine.

Squared Fan

The Lead walks forward as the Follow backs up 3 steps, then take a side step to his right (her left) side, then close without weight. The path is a right angle, without any rotation. The timing is slow-slow-quick-quick-slow. A few ballroom studios (not many) still teach this version, as the most elementary tango step possible.

Turning Fan

Since that right-angle turn is a bit abrupt, the smoother version turns 90° counterclockwise on the last three steps. This feels smoother because it maintains a traveling momentum. This is the step at the beginning of Part 2 of the practice sequence.

These two steps are a bit problematical, in two ways.

- 1) It's tricky for beginners to lead a step that backs the Follow. It's difficult to communicate which foot she must step on first, if she doesn't already know. This often results in a mis-step. Following side steps is much easier.
- 2) A Follow would rather see where she is going, facing forward into a step, instead of backing blindly.

For these reasons, most social tango dancers do the following version of the Fan:

Promenade Fan (Counterclockwise Fan)

Promenade forward 2 steps, with both facing forward. Then he gently but clearly leads her to turn halfway counterclockwise, to face back at him, to be in the exact same position as the third step of the Turning Fan, squarely facing one's partner. Continue with the same final 2 steps, both rotating a quarter-turn counterclockwise.

The Promenade Fan is easier to lead than the first two versions above because she more clearly knows which foot to step on when you begin with forward promenade position. And she may prefer seeing forward instead of backing up. This is the version that is usually called "The Fan."

Follow's hint: In tango, when she feels him lead counterclockwise rotation, she automatically reaches back diagonally with her right foot.

Lead's hint: Your partner needs to feel this rotational lead, so be clear by rolling your right elbow forward at that moment.

Clockwise Fan

This is the same forward promenade but turn halfway clockwise instead of counterclockwise. This step is described in the second half of Part 2 of the practice sequence.

For the Lead, the Counterclockwise Fan feels like a "pushing lead" as he gently sends her forward past him, toward his left. Oppositely, the Clockwise Fan feels like a "pulling lead" as he passes by in front of her, pulling away from her.

Turning Corte

This is just the last three steps of the Promenade Cortes above. It is often done by itself, or added to the end of a tango step. It is described at the end of Part 4 of the practice sequence.

Hint: If the Lead leans forward into this step just before dancing it (we call it a "dive-bomb exit"), the Follow can sense it more successfully.

The Trouble Step

Do a False-Step Corte, stepping to the side then replacing weight back to where you started, then continue with the 3-step Turning Corte. The timing is slow-slow-quick-quick-slow.

This step is intended to avoid a collision (i.e., get out of trouble) then turn into a new direction that may have more room. But it's also a satisfying and intuitive step by itself, even if you're not in trouble.

Mixing the Fans

You can begin with the Fan, repeat it, then turn to the right, as your basic tango steps. Add the Trouble Step and backing the Follow for variety. Then when you want more variety, spice it up with one of the parts of the practice sequence. That can be it, for an easy and satisfying three-minute tango. Tango doesn't have to be hard!

Or you can spice it up further with these classic tango steps.

Ochos (Cruzado, Scissors, Cross-Steps)

The Lead crosses his right foot over his left, takes a small side step to his left, then replaces weight on his right foot, bringing his right back a little. It's the same as the basic cross-step-waltz but in slow-quick-quick timing. Then do the same to the other side, crossing the left foot over. The Follow mirrors this, crossing her left foot first.

Since that "rear" foot usually isn't free in tango, take a quick side step on the first foot (his left and her right) just **before** count one of the music. Then the cross-step will happen exactly on the downbeat (count 1) of the music.

Exit (Salida): Take the first cross-step, then he leans forward into the usual 3-step Turning Corte.

Multiple Ochos

If you want to double the length of time (16 slow counts instead of 8), you don't double the number of Ochos. Instead you do three sets of Ochos, then exit.

Follow's Solo Ocho

Take the first Ocho cross-step, then the Lead stays on that crossed step as he leads his partner to do an Ocho by herself. To exit, he briefly lifts his crossed right foot, then steps on it again just as she is crossing forward into the exit, to dance the Turning Corte with her.

These can also be Multiple Solo Ochos.

Alternate Ocho Styles

Instead of doing the three-step Ocho, like cross-step waltz, you can:

Cross over, then point the free foot open to the side, as you swivel to face back. Repeat opposite.

Cross over, then sweep the free foot circling around in a ronde-de-jambe, lightly dragging the toe to the floor in a semicircle from behind to crossing in front.

Molinete

In closed dance position, the Follow steps straight back on her right foot as the Lead steps straight forward left, toward her. Then rock the Lead back to place on the other foot. Repeat this rocking step several times. This step usually rotates as a couple counterclockwise.

To fit this into an 8 count musical phrase, do the Molinete for a total of 6 slow rocking steps. Then finish with a counterclockwise 3-step Turning Corte (quick-quick-slow).

Tango Dips

Tango was originally called "the dance with the stop," *baile con corté*. Most tango steps come to a stop. The dip is an especially dramatic way to stop, especially at the end of the dance.

The classic tango dip is a simple side step, which becomes a dip.

Leads: Step side left, shifting most of your weight onto your left foot, as you lead her to step right almost between your feet. Then roll your right elbow forward to help her rotate her upper body toward her left. Give her lots of room under your right arm.

Follows: Step side right, with almost all of your weight onto your right foot, stepping somewhat between his feet. Then twist your body slightly toward your left. Keep your body somewhat straight, from toe to head. Support your own weight with your right leg. You may look toward your left, away from him, or look at him, but Follows usually don't look straight up at the ceiling in a tango dip.

Crossing Into The Dip

In tango you often take a cross-step then continue into a dip as the next step. This lets you travel into the dip. This is useful because tango constantly has cross-steps, often as links between figures.

- Every second step of a Tango Promenade is a cross-step.
- The exit getting out of most figures is a cross-step.
- Ochos are cross-steps.
- If you happen to know grapevines, every fourth step for the Follow is a forward cross-step. Whenever she is crossing forward, that can be a link into any of these figures.

Traveling into a dip provides better contrast than just doing a dip from stationary position. In other words, if tango is the dance with the stop, and the dip is a more dramatic stop, it's better to be traveling before you stop.