

Beginners' Lesson 1

Overview

Throughout the class, Marie discussed tango music, technique, etiquette and how Argentine Tango differs from other partner dances. She emphasized that tango is totally improvisational so requires clear and constant communication between the partners. We practiced walking without and then with music, without and then with partners, forward (ladies backward) and in place. We practiced listening for and walking on both the slow and the quick beats.

Details

- **Music**--We listened to the music of Carlos Di'Sarli's orchestra and began by walking naturally but with certainty, to the most obvious beat in the music. We refer to this as the walking beat. The more subtle but still obvious beat in the middle of two walking beats is often referred to as the rhythm or the "quicks".
- **Tango is not a collection of steps or figures but is, instead, totally improvised.** That's what makes it so interesting, challenging and addictive. No two dances are ever exactly alike. The possibilities for putting together your own dance are infinite and are determined by the music, your own abilities, your partner, and the space on the dance floor. You will never be bored dancing tango because you will never master all there is to know and you will find and dance to more complexities in the music. Ladies, with practice, you'll learn to place your feet nicely and to do nifty embellishments that make every dance different and you look like an expert!
- **Tango is Attitude!** Be Tango Man or Tango Woman when you come through door into the studio. Leave timidity and hesitancy outside the door.
- **Tango is walking**—straight, curving, forward, backward, side ways and crossing, using stops, pauses and different rhythms depending on the music. Just walking!
- **Dancers' weight placement and starting foot position:** Weight should be over the balls or forward part of the foot rather than the middle (regular standing position) of their foot. Leaders should stand with their feet about six inches apart and maintain that distance when standing. It is more stable for the couple (since the lady is almost always on just one leg). Followers, when standing, keep your heels together and toes slightly turned out. All dancers should try to maintain the slight foot turnout because that foot placement is much more stable than that of straight feet.
- **Posture:** Dancers should maintain an upright but relaxed upper body. Keep your head directly over your spine and your ribcage upright but not tense. This is the core of your body from which the power to move emanates. If you don't maintain that upright posture, your core pulls away from your partner. Since that is where partners connect, lead and follow becomes much more difficult
- **Leaders' Walk**
Keep your head up and your eyes looking in the direction in which you want to travel. Walk directly forward toward the lady's center. If you move forward in a positive (rather than tentative) manner, the lady will feel your lead and will extend her leg behind her. Be careful not to "walk wide" or like a cowboy. It pulls the lady off balance and/or your intention is not clear.
- **Followers' walk:** Keeping your weight forward while walking backward takes practice but is critical to tango. In short, when you feel the lead, extend your free leg back and put your toe on the floor directly behind your spine. As the leader moves forward, you will naturally transfer your weight to your back leg and bring your now un-weighted leg under you, heels together. When you feel the lead for the next step, do it again. Try to keep your movements fluid. Sounds complicated but you will get it! Practice by walking down a hallway or the length of a room. It's easier to keep your weight forward if you practice in heels but, if your feet hurt (like mine) or your balance is shaky, just walk in flats or without shoes.
- **Feet**—in tango we dance into the floor rather than float on the floor. Always try to keep your feet and toes relaxed and use the floor. Strike the floor lightly and smoothly.

- **What followers need from Leaders**—absolute clarity so they don't have to guess what the leader wants them to do and, what the man chooses to do must make sense to the music.
- **What leaders need from Followers**--wait for the lead (don't anticipate), when led, place your foot in time to the music and your weight clearly over your supporting leg.

Walking Exercises—Individual & with Partners

The individuals walked **forward in a circle around the line of dance on the walking beat** trying to keep the walk natural. We practiced alternating walking with weight changes and then did the same with partners. Marie stressed that the leaders need to signal the partners by leading a slight "up" when the walk is to be in place (weight changes) rather than traveling. This "up" is achieved naturally because the knee doesn't flex (causing a slight "down") like it does to initiate a forward walk. We practiced walking three forward steps followed by three weight changes. Marie stressed that this is not a prescribed pattern but is for practice only. After practicing this, we were encouraged to vary the number of forward steps and weight changes.

Marie introduced the "quick" beat and we practiced walking with partners while using some quicks for weight changes. She again reminded us to vary the pattern.

Practice your tango walk whenever possible, with or without a partner. You don't need a dance studio. Just walk the length of a room or a hallway in your home. Men, pretend you have a partner. Don't worry about stepping on her feet. Walk naturally, toward her center and with intention. She'll move. Ladies, walk backwards the length of a room or down a hallway. Remember to keep your weight forward. Yes, it feels odd but this is our major responsibility now. The guys, on the other hand, have to figure out what they want to do and how to communicate that movement to us while navigating on a sometimes crowded dance floor.

Next session: See how to make a dance from what you already know, learn a few more elements, and practice your new skills. Everyone interested will receive a cd of carefully selected beautiful and danceable tango music. Listen to it as much as possible. You will become familiar with tango music in general and those songs, in particular. Many say that the better you know the music, the better you will dance.