

How the Finns stole the *Tango*

by John Bechtel, Freelance Writer

It is difficult to begin this story at the beginning, because the tango's precise origin, as with other early examples of globalization such as the invention of the wheel or the Black Plague, is shrouded in mystery. It is generally conceded that the tango is Argentina's contribution to humanity, but the tango in its earliest forms preceded the formation of Argentina itself.

Cordoba, Argentina's second-largest city was originally part of the Viceroyalty of Peru, and the territories now known as Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and much of present-day Bolivia in 1776, were all one entity known as the Viceroyalty of Rio de la Plata.

But why quibble over details? Everything about the tango story is riddled with contradictions. It derives its very name from the beat of African drums (known as tan-go), merges native Indian rhythms and music of the first Spanish colonists, adds the milonga (an early rural dance form that mutates into the tango about 1880), and refines itself by adapting European salon dances such as the waltz, to become what we now know as the tango. And of course, true tango contains no drums in its musical ensemble. Go figure. *(Continued on page 32)*





La Boca is a popular destination for tourists visiting Argentina, with its colorful houses and pedestrian street, the Caminito, where tango artists perform and tango-related memorabilia is sold.

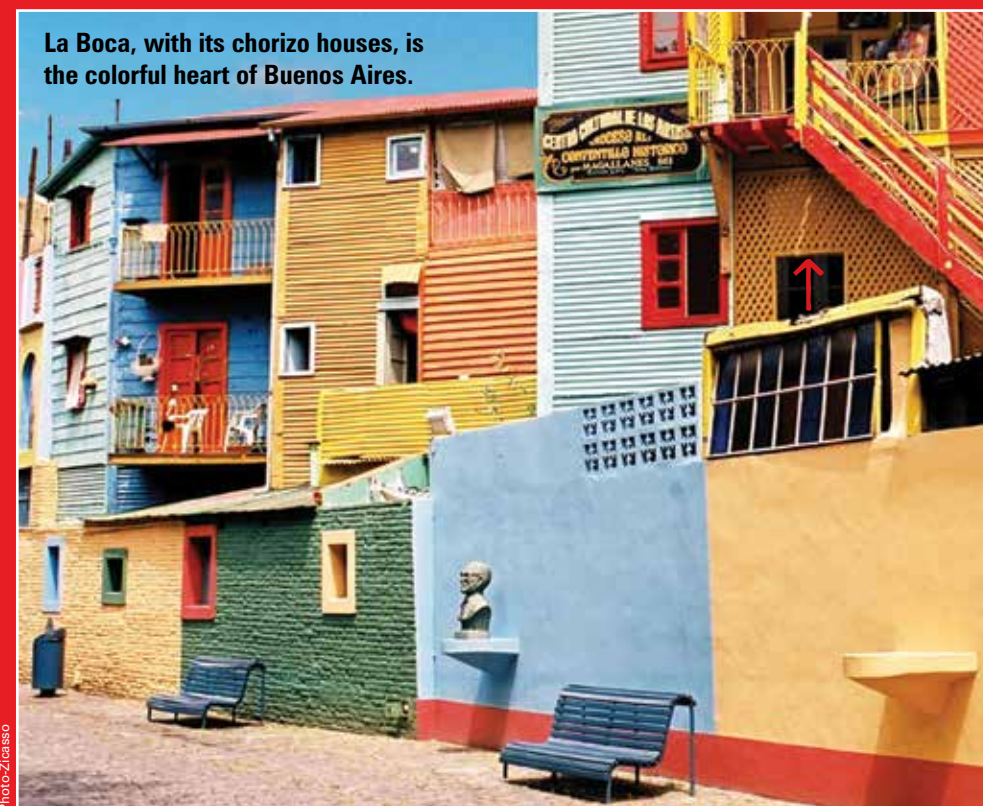
(Continued from page 30)

Early Argentine tango in the bars and bordellos of La Boca

Before we get to the part where the Finns stole the tango, we need to know a little more about the Argentines who lost it. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, there were two Argentinas, just as there were two Europes. The upper classes of Argentine society were concentrated in the coastal regions and wanted centralized government patterned after Europe's elites, and the working classes in the rural areas, as typified by the gauchos (cowboys), were considered essentially lawless and lowlives.

The factories, shipyards, meatpacking and hide plants owned by the wealthy were staffed by foreign workers, mostly from Eastern Europe, who lived in the poorest neighborhoods (barrios). These were predominantly men who immigrated without their families, and they often lived in very small houses that came to be called chorizo houses. As their

families eventually joined these French, Italian, Irish, Turkish, and German



La Boca, with its chorizo houses, is the colorful heart of Buenos Aires.

men, they built onto the back of these houses, so that eventually these houses were narrow but quite long, shaped like chorizo sausages. You can see many of these "chorizo houses" in La Boca, home to many early dock workers, and the birthplace of the Argentine tango. At the *fin de siècle* (19th century) the streets of La Boca were unpaved and muddy. The men lived five-or-six to a room, and congregated on street corners and crowded into bars where they drowned their sorrows in cheap wine and sang melancholy songs about their loved ones left behind. The original tango dancing was by men, either alone or in pairs. In an environment of mostly men and few women, the dancing was often combative, aggressive, and with alcohol added to the mix, often resulted in fights in competition for the available women, most of whom were prostitutes. Lines would form in these bars and bordellos as the dirty and lonely men waited for their turn. The proprietors of these establishments hired musicians, usually in trios of guitar, violin, and flute to entertain the clientele and relieve the boredom, and there was lots of body rubbing when the men and women danced in

cramped quarters. Today's gentrified tango dancing still includes lots of walking steps and close physical contact. In La Boca, lonely, exhausted men, smelling of sweat, liquor, and spoiled meat, found refuge and comfort in music, dance, and forgetfulness, often till sunrise. The highly-improvised music of the tango was a lonely wail into the night performed on a bandoneon, an accordion-like instrument imported from Germany in 1886. The dance was one of sorrow, desire, real pain, and often a vertical rehearsal of what was to follow horizontally upstairs. The lyrics were often obscene. There is no question the early tango belonged to the night.

The other Argentina

There was another Argentina. During the fifty years from 1880 to 1930, Argentina became very wealthy. Many of the old neighborhoods were torn down and replaced with wide boulevards, beautiful parks, and new, taller buildings of French and Italian architecture. Argentina wanted to look like Paris, and largely succeeded. The wealthy elite imported their furniture from the best manufacturers in France, and annual trips to the Continent were *de rigueur*, as the Argentines made the tour of the parties where *salon* dancing was all the rage. They went to see and be seen. The Argentines made such an impression, the French coined the phrase "rich as an Argentinian." For these Argentines, the tango was an object of scorn, as indecent, and the dance of whores and the working class. Something you might encounter in the dirty bars and bordellos of Boca.

Europe's Belle Époque 1871-1914

As in Argentina during this period, there were two Europes. Among the commercial, political, and academic elites the period from 1871-1914 was a golden age, equivalent to the Gilded Age in the United States. This was almost half a century free of war in a Europe usually fighting with itself. It was an age of optimism and economic prosperity marked by a 2nd industrial revolution and enormous technological innovation. It was a voluptuous age



Rue de la Paix by Jean Béraud (1907). Béraud painted many scenes of Parisian daily life during the Belle Époque. He received the Légion d'honneur in 1894.

when the arts evolved and flourished, including abstract art, cubism, impressionism, and modernism. It was a second renaissance, with people ready to ditch the stodgy pomp and ostentation of old Europe.

There was a desire for the new and sensational. There was a proliferation of the French courtesans, music halls, bars and bordellos, and Viennese waltzes. It was the age of the Eiffel Tower, Art Nouveau, Toulouse Lautrec, Pablo Picasso, Arthur Rimbaud, and Igor Stravinsky. It was an age of mass everything: mass transportation (think railroads and autos), mass education, mass production, mass media, mass distraction, and mass fashions. In the arts, architecture, music, painting, literature, and dance, everyone was looking for the new idea. Permissiveness and cheerfulness were in the air. Bohemian and Montmartre were in, Versailles was out. While the wealthy of Argentina were endeavoring to imitate Old Europe, Old Europe was in an age of rapid transformation in search of the new and exotic.

Late in this Belle Époque, some young Argentinians showed up with a new and indecent dance called the tango, and it caught fire among the bored Parisian nobility. Parties were organized, complete with Argentine musical troupes; dance lessons were given, and dance manuals were written.

It spread to the various European capitals and women's fashions soon followed. Tango Teas came in vogue among high society women, and an article in one newspaper gushed: "What shall you wear to the Tango Teas? Let me whisper to you a secret, only to be revealed when it is found out, my dear, there is no tango in America or at least, in New York. But it is quite different in Paris, and it is for Paris and the tango that the French dance frocks are made . . ."

Eventually even the puritanically-inclined United States overcame its reticence. One writer of the time said that the Americans were finally doing it, although the women were wearing "bumpers" under their dresses to prevent any unseemly rubbing of body parts between male and female participants.

Finland gets the tango

Finland was not immune to the cultural influences of Europe's Belle Époque, as evidenced by the architecture of many buildings still standing from that period; but this era was hardly its golden age. Some say the tango was brought to the Bors Hotel in Helsinki in 1913 by a Danish couple, and others say it arrived even earlier with British troubadours. Still others maintain that it was introduced

(Continued on page 34)



Tango competition in Tampere, Finland, where the “Tampere Tango Week” was recently celebrated beginning in October, 2016.

(Continued from page 33)
to Finland by a Finnish ballet dancer named Toivo Niskanen, who learned the steps in St. Petersburg, but who caught the fever in Paris. However it was accepted and began to be modified, even as it fell from favor in Argentine polite society. What could the self-effacing, introspective Finnish nature possibly have in common with the bawdy origins of the Argentine tango?

As the tango spread through the European capitals, European composers began writing their own music for the dance, and the dance itself evolved in tandem. By the time it made its way to Finland, the dance had lost some of its Argentinian rhythmic agility and had taken on an even, heavier tread, almost a march, primarily due to German influence.

While people can dance to almost any music, most music is not dance music, per se. In a purist sense, dance and its music co-evolve together, and each component affects the other. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is with the interaction of a successful DJ and his music and the dancers on the floor. Who has not been to a dance where the DJ seems to be brain dead,

because he never seems to notice which of his choices bring all the dancers out to the floor, and which ones leave them disinterestedly in their seats? Composers of tango often observe those who dance to their music in real time, and notice how the dancers respond to the beat and tempo and who then respond and adapt their music to the movements of the dancers. This is dance music at its best, when everyone involved listens with their ears, their feet, their bodies, and their heart.

How did the tango resonate with the spirit of the Finns, and how did the Finns change the tango? Let's take a look at what was going on in Finland during this same time period.

The other Europe

When Sweden was a great power, it pushed its border with Russia eastward. At the time, Finland was not a nation state, but only a group of provinces ruled from Stockholm. In 1809, Russia captured the Finnish territory and established it as an autonomous duchy, with the Russian czar as the duke. Three years later, Helsinki was made the capital of Finland, and by 1825, Finland was a nation state in all but name. By

1863, the process of making the Finnish language an official administrative language was under way. By 1878, Finland had its own army, but its head of state was still the Russian czar.

Then the trouble started. From 1899 to 1905, Russia began to apply pressure to reduce Finland's sense of independence. This process became known as Russification. We might call it de-Finlandizing Finland. Finland got a short break in this process in 1905 during the Bolshevik Revolution. In 1906, Finland seized a window of opportunity and established a parliamentary form of government. They declared their independence in 1917, and then engaged in a two-year Civil War. In 1919, they became a republic, but in the next 30 years they endured two more wars, the loss of tens of thousands dead and many more wounded.

Finland experienced the last 15- to 20 years of the Belle Époque getting squeezed by Russia and then the Soviet Union. In mainland Europe, the Belle Époque wound down just before the outbreak of WWII. Art Nouveau ended about 1910-11. In 1912, the Titanic sank. Confidence and celebration

were replaced with anxiety as political tensions mounted. All these events found their way into how the tango was perceived, experienced, and how it evolved.

While the Argentinian tango began heavily influenced by machismo and aggressiveness due to a preponderantly male population, when it was introduced into Finland the situation was reversed. Conflict and the threat of conflict reduced the number of available males, and there was no need for intense competition for the females of society. Men were in short supply, and this disequilibrium got worse over the decades. So the mournful notes of tango music and the lyrics of lost love resonated powerfully with the Finns.

The Finnish population was largely rural, while tango mania was overtaking heavily populated urban areas of European capitals. During the early years of tango in Finland, it had to compete with the foxtrot and the polka and it lost to both. During the 1920s the Argentine tango was changing, but many of those changes did not spread to Europe quickly. The Finnish dance did not have the bounce and flair of the Argentine tango; the knees were slightly bent, with no side

steps, and the feet were interleaved as opposed to the toe-to-toe of the Argentine variety. During the 1940s the Finnish connection with Germany was severed and the tango became more Finnish. By the late 1940s fully one half of all popular Finnish songs were tango-related. During the 1950s, outdoor dancing pavilions were ubiquitous all over Finland, and tango penetrated to the countryside. During the 1960s, more tangos were composed and recorded than before or since. Today the tango is close to being the Finnish national dance. There are over 2,000 tango clubs in Finland, with a population of only 5.5 million. The small town of Seinäjoki, Finland, three hours north of Helsinki, and with a population of just 59,000, hosts a tango festival every year with as many as 100,000 in attendance.

Nordic melancholy vs. Latin passion

It has been said that the tango helps Finnish men make Finnish women happy. The Finnish tango is all about close physical body contact, cheek-to-cheek. It is a quiet and melancholy dance, and perhaps appeals to the Slavic side of Finnish nature. As one

Finnish wife at the Seinäjoki festival said, “It's our way to make love.” With Argentinian tango, the dancers stand farther apart, and the woman is beside the man, “almost dancing alone.” The dancers are expected to be serious, and flexibility helps: the woman bends backwards almost 45 degrees. The Argentine dance is readily sensuous; the Finnish is darker, more solemn, as befits a nation that lost a massive chunk of its territory as a prize to the Soviet Union after WWII. As a matter of fact, during the 1940s the tango was banned in Finland.

The most famous Finnish tango is undoubtedly *Satumaa* or Fairytale Land, about a faraway but unreachable place. The untranslatable Finnish word *kaiho* and the Portuguese word *saudade* best convey the essence of the appeal of Finnish tango: an incompleteness and a yearning that one unconsciously never expects to resolve. The Finnish tango is a wistful recognition and respect for the wanting or anticipation of something; sort of like the hungry person who engages in mournful anticipation of an incredible feast to which he may not be invited. Or the longing for a lost loved-one who can never be restored to you.

Historically, the Finns didn't always get to sit down at that meal, or only after sustaining heart-rending losses. For the Finns, the tango in music and dance is a metaphor for a world view and life experience. It is about heart and love and loss. Life is what it is.

Did the Finns really steal the tango? Yes, in the sense that they helped popularize it when Argentina rejected it as socially offensive. The tango is a rags-to-riches story, and the Finns embraced it when it was in the rags stage of the La Boca bars and bordellos, and the Finns burnished it and gave it their own brand. It can be found in every country in the world today and it is danced at the most exclusive of evening galas. By the time Argentina reclaimed the tango, the locus of its popularity had moved from La Boca to the barrio of San Telmo, where today it is celebrated every Sunday (and every other day) on the streets and in the bars near Plaza Dorrego.

The spirit of tango has universal appeal.



Pairs dancing tango during the Finish Tango Festival in Seinäjoki, Finland.