

Fundamentals of Tango: Leaders

Bryce Burgess

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Image taken from <https://tangoclassesnyc.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/tango-in-manhattan.jpg>

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Chapter 1

Document Introduction

1 Motivation

The purpose of this document is to be an introduction to social tango, including posture, movement fundamentals, etiquette, some figures, suggestions on how to improve, and the different types of music and dances. You don't need to read the document straight through - you can skip around if you find a section is getting boring or too laden with details. Though I do suggest reading through the full thing at *some* point, since there are plenty of nuances that are good to review or learn to improve your tango as you progress. The first time you read it, you probably want to focus on the basic movements, and less on the theory and more abstract stuff. But don't ignore that stuff altogether, since that's really what makes someone a good Leader, meaning that it will allow you to comfortably lead figures and improvise by feeling rather than thinking.

The main focus is on the fundamentals of movements, and to provide a basis that will help you to improve your dancing after the basics. With some understanding of this, I think that your ability to improve is drastically increased, as each new move, sequence and figure can be put into a context, and dancers gain an understanding of how to modify things that they already know and how to approach them differently. Both of these are critical for social dancing. Odds are that you will not absorb all the information on the first read, so I encourage said dancers to read and re-read it.

2 Terminology

This is the boring part of the document, but should help to communicate more clearly, feel free to come back to this for reference.

- For the person leading the dance, I will always say “Leader”, with a capital “L”, and similarly, I will use “Follower” with a capital “F” for the person being led. Though the Leader is often a man and the Follower is often a woman, I will *not* be assuming this, to encourage everyone to vary and experiment with their dancing.
- In terms of footwork, I use the term “matched” to say that if the Leader is on their left foot, then the Follower is on their right, and vice versa. When standing still and facing each other, this means that the Leader and Follower are mirroring each others' weighted foot. The alternative is called “cross system” (i.e. both Leader and Follower are on their left foot, or both are on their right foot). Spoilers: you'll use both.
- Tips for practicing certain fundamentals will be

formatted like this at the end of each section.

3 Good Habits

There are some main habits that you can develop that will serve you well in tango. They will make it easy and natural to dance smoothly and in a way that your partner can easily read. Some are broken in service to particular movements, but those exceptions should be mindful *exceptions*, not the norm. They'll be expanded on in following section, but I want to list them here. All of them can be practiced alone or with a partner.

- Tango your posture
- Maintain your balance
- Collect your feet
- Keep your weight on one foot at a time

Chapter 2

Solo Elements

1 Posture and Balance

Tango posture is important to be mindful of, but is not especially difficult. It helps to keep in mind that the fancy figures are mostly in the legs, so they need space. And the information communicating all that fancy stuff happens through the chest and embrace, so your chests should be close, and arms should be well connected.

In short, you want to stand straight, but relaxed. For your upper body, your head should be up, your spine elongated, and your shoulders rolled back. Your core is engaged, your legs are extended with your knees slightly bent, your feet together, and your weight is on the balls of your feet. Here is one important subtlety, though: while your body is straight, you want to lean slightly forward from your ankles.

You do not want to be bent at the waist, but instead you want your torso and legs to form a straight line, angled slightly forward. This is something to practice, and is discussed further in the section on shifting weight.

This is something that is good to practice on your own. Just periodically while standing in line for groceries or whatever, straighten your posture, and get into a tango posture with straight body and slight lean at the ankles.

There's not too much to say specifically about balance except that it's important and you want to be good at maintaining your own balance especially while moving. In the next few sections there'll be a bit of discussion about weight shifting and indicating leads using the positioning of your weight, but it is important that neither partner is off balance or relying on their partner for balance. It makes it really hard to communicate your movements, and it is just exhausting to try and hold your partner up for an entire song.

2 The Elements of Movement

Heads up, this is a long section with lots of subsections.

There are three main components to every movement in Tango. These are: leg extensions and collections, shifting and controlling your weight, and rotation about your own and your partners' axes. Steps come from combining the first two, but don't be fooled into thinking that they're *always* combined.

2.1 Leg Extension and Collection

Extension

There's not anything particularly tricky about extending your leg. The only things to keep in mind are that your foot generally should stay quite close to the ground, since tango is a very grounded dance in general, and that the movement of your leg should really feel like it's coming from the hip. The leg that you extend will always be your free leg, and while extending your leg is always the first part of making a step by then shifting your weight, there are plenty of times that you might not transfer your weight. So keep in mind at least that they *can* be done separately.

This is quite simple to do and to practice, and can easily be mixed into other exercises. Stand somewhere preferably with smooth flooring, and just extend your leg. Can be forward, backward to the side, or across your other leg, front or back. If you're just doing the extension, try to keep your leg pretty straight, and sink down with your standing leg to extend the free leg further. It shouldn't have any weight on it.

Collection

Collecting your feet is one of the core habits that you should form when beginning tango. All that it means is that when taking a step, your ankles brush past each other. No cowboy walking. One of the benefits to collecting your feet is that your feet are out of the way for your partner to move around. It is also part of what makes many of the movements look and feel snappy, such as when you collect after taking a step forward, and then transition into a dramatic sidestep. Notably there are times when you will not collect your feet, perhaps for dramatic effect or as part of a figure, but those should be the exceptions, and they should be mindful.

This is simple enough to practice on your own, just walk around and concentrate on brushing your ankles together. It's even better if you get into your tango posture and take some snappy steps forwards, backwards, and to the side.

2.2 Weight and Weight Shifts

Another of the core habits that you would do well to develop is to keep your weight on one foot or the other, and not split in between the two. This means that you have a free leg that can easily move to form or prepare for your next figure, while you stay solidly balanced. Additionally, it does a lot to keep your partner informed about where you are, what you're doing, and what you intend. If you want to do something fancy with your other leg (as a Leader), just perform a weight shift.

Weight shifting is perhaps the main, and most subtle thing that makes tango so elegant, dynamic, seamless, and difficult to anticipate. It has two main aspects: shifting between your feet, which will affect how you are able to move, and shifting the position of your weight within a single foot, which will be a significant element of communicating a lead.

We touched on it before, but you and your partner can have any combination of weight placements, so long as your weight isn't split, and you'll have interesting figures that you can do. In fact, experimenting with your weight placement is a great way to come up with new ideas.

Between Feet

When dancing, you will almost always keep one of your feet weighted (weighted foot), and one foot unweighted (free foot), as should your partner. Note that is the Follower's responsibility to make sure that they have only one foot weighted at a time, but it is the Leader's responsibility to indicate which foot they want to Follower to be standing on.

There are four main possibilities for shifting weight, no matter how your feet are positioned in the middle of a complex figure:

- Leader changes and Follower changes while matched (staying matched),
- Leader changes while Follower doesn't change (matched \leftrightarrow cross, try from each foot),
- Follower changes while Leader doesn't change (matched \leftrightarrow cross, while Follower maintains each foot),
- Leader changes and Follower changes while in cross system (staying in cross system).

It may be prudent to practice a few weight shifts on your own, just to get in the habit of solidly being on one foot or the other, and to quickly and decisively change between them, but I don't imagine this will be easy and natural for most people.

The more difficult thing to practice with shifting between your feet, is in communicating with a partner. Get into the partner practice embrace and spontaneously lead a mix of the all four weight shifts.

This practice should help you to lead steps more clearly and to gain a great deal of sensitivity about how your Follower is weighted and positioned, which is important to know so that you can know what your options are for the next step.

Within Foot

This is both more complicated and more subtle. The importance of being able to do this is that most steps that you lead are generated from small weight shifts within your foot. Up until now I've said that leads are communicated to the Follow through the frame and the chest, and that's true. But those shifts are generated here in your feet. For instance, moving your weight slightly more towards your toes will shift your chest and your frame slightly forward, which the Follow will read as a cue for extending their leg backwards.

- 1: Solo balance practice

The purpose of this exercise is to improve your balance, and to give you a greater range of motion in your lead. There are two-footed (easier) and one-footed (more realistic/useful) variations of this. Both are better if practiced next to a mirror, but it isn't strictly necessary

Two feet: Get in your tango posture, with your feet together and weight on both feet. Tilt your body forward from your ankle (back and legs aligned) as far as you can, to the point where you start to lose your balance. If you don't lose your balance a couple times, you're not going far enough. While forward, try also shifting your weight diagonally to your right and left.

One foot: Same as with two feet, but your weight is shifted entirely to one foot (be sure to practice both sides). Balancing will be harder. Also practice staying on one foot, but moving your weight from left to right.

2: Partner communication practice

Get into one of the practice embraces with a Follower, and without taking a step yourself, lead them to extend their free leg backwards, forwards (towards you), and out to the side, by shifting your weight forwards, backwards, and to the side. Try doing it with and without a leg extension of your own.

Note: if you want the Follower to extend across themselves, you will need to indicate whether they should cross their free leg in front or behind their standing leg, which you do by subtly shifting your weight within your weighted foot.

Another Note: This can be combined with the weight shift exercise between feet so that you can lead any extension from either foot. Shift weight, lead extensions, repeat.

2.3 Rotation

Within tango, there are many many movements that involve rotation, and these can basically be broken into rotations where your partner is moving around you, and where you are moving around your partner. Whether you are a Leader or a Follower, you need to be able to do both. It may be useful to think about the rotation in terms of which one out of your combined four feet is the pivot.

Your Axis

When you are rotating around your own axis, your weight should be on one foot. If you're the Leader, you are going to be using your free leg to push the rotation along while guiding the Follower to step around you. There are ways to do this stylishly.

For any rotational movement, or any rotation lead, one of the main skills that you'll need is dissociation. This is the ability to rotate your upper body more, less or without moving your lower body. Your upper body and lower body are still in close communication with each other.

As the Leader, this is a big component to leading smooth rotational movements while allowing yourself to do other things. For the Follower, a major use is in reading a lead, which is a subtle movement in the chest, and turning it into a big, beautiful movement of your legs.

To practice dissociation, start by standing with good posture facing a wall or a mirror and put your arms in a solo practice embrace. Then, in a slow and controlled way, rotate your upper body 90 degrees to the right, while keeping your hips and toes pointed forward. Repeat this a few times on both the left and right, and then try to do the same for 180 degrees. Don't hurt yourself. Other variations include keeping balanced on one foot while doing this.

Your Partner's Axis

You will also need to know how to rotate around your partner's axis. Doing this will involve using some of the dissociation from above.

Though the focus of the exercise is in how to rotate around your partner, you will also be rotating on your own axis. Pick a point or place an object on the floor - you'll be stepping around it in a square while keeping your chest pointing towards the invisible person you're stepping around. Start off with it in front of you and to your right. Step forward with your *right* foot, and rotate on that foot towards your right so that your hips are now facing where you came from. Then take a step to your left with your free left foot, collect your right foot, and rotate on your left foot clockwise so that your hips are again pointing in the same direction as when you started. Step back with your free right foot, collect your left foot, and step to the side back to your starting position. If you want to keep it simple to start, you don't need to keep your chest pointed towards your invisible partner in the middle, but that is something you should try and work up to.

I also recommend that you follow this same exercise going in a square to your left (first step forward will be with your left).

Chapter 3

Partner Elements

1 Frame

Probably the most important prerequisite information to talking about a dancing embrace (it applies to many different partner dances) is the idea of having a frame. This really just means that there's a degree of springiness, give, and resistance within your arms. This does *not* mean that your arms are locked in place for all eternity, just that they are better for communicating movement between you and your partner than wet noodles.

Whatever embrace you are using, make sure that you are keeping your frame.

1.1 Partner Practice

For some practices, especially early on, it can be useful to use a practice embrace which is more simple, but still does a good job of illustrating how information is communicated through the embrace. The main points against it are that it doesn't look as good, and it creates a lot more distance between partners.

My preferred practice embrace is palm to palm. For this, the Leader and Follower stand facing each other, touching their palms to each other. It's great because it's a simple way of getting used to the feeling of maintaining a frame and communicating movement to each other without any awkwardness from being close, or doing the embrace wrong, or feeling like you should be doing something more complex.

1.2 The Embrace, El Abrazo

This is where we talk about the embrace you'll use when dancing. First, get into your tango posture. As the Leader, your left hand will be extended out to your side, with elbow bent and pointing down, and fingers pointed to the left. The Follower will take your left hand in her right (with her fingers pointed up and elbow down) before you each close your hands. The Follower will then put their left hand on your shoulder or upper arm to set the distance they'd like to be at, and lastly the Leader should reach their right hand around the Follower's back underneath their left arm to connect to the Follower's upper back.

I know that might all sound super rigid and formulaic, but the embrace itself is fairly flexible, with shifts and adjustments made as the movements require. Also, it should not be rigid or tense, muscles should feel relaxed. Don't squeeze your Follower's hand in a death grip - they won't appreciate it. And neither should the Follow force you to hold up the full weight of their arm - that gets exhausting really quickly.

In Tango, there are two main embraces called open and closed. They are structurally similar, and differ primarily in the distance between the dancers' chests. Any move that can be done in one can be done in the other, but some will develop a preference. I recommend that you be at least competent in both, since the closeness of the embrace is chosen by the Follower.

1.3 Individual Practice

When practicing alone, one should absolutely be in the correct posture, though there are modified positions for your arms that you *may* adopt for comfort. The first is nearly identical to the regular embrace, except that your right hand is placed on your stomach, with your elbow pointing to the right. The second places your elbows out to your sides, in line with your shoulders, and your hands vertically above your elbows.

2 Figures

In making a sequence of steps, you need to know exactly what your role is as the Leader.

I'll also give a small selection of common and easy figures, that reinforce the fundamentals covered in this document. There are more figures that exist than there are dancers, and they can require more iterations of these fundamentals, more precise timing, multiple simultaneous movements, and small deviations from these fundamentals.

These may seem really obvious on how to do, but keep in mind that you are not just learning how to walk in a tango dance, but are also learning how to Lead, or follow a lead from, your partner.

Additionally, while many skilled dancers can do big, flashy, elaborate figures that boggle the mind, they are able to do those, and especially to improvise them because they are very good at communicating nuanced but clear movements to their Follows. Learn how to lead the basics cleanly and smoothly, and form a solid connection with your partner. Since I know you'll want to do the flashy stuff (everyone does), try to improvise some things based on stuff you already have down, both to see what you need to work on, and as a way to measure and push your own progress.

2.1 Making A Figure

It has been said innumerable times, to the point that it sounds stale, but as the Leader, you do not control the Follower, you can only invite her. When dancing, there will inevitably be times when you intend to lead something, and your Follower does not do it. There are many possible explanations for this. She may not know the movement, or your lead may have been unclear, or she got briefly distracted, or she really doesn't like that move. In any case, remember that she is not obligated to do as you intend. You can only provide a suggestion, and react to what she does.

With that in mind, how can you start tearing up the dance floor? The process is cyclical, and deeply depends on always having a good sense about where the Follow's body is. Where are their feet, which foot is bearing weight? Are their legs intertwined in some way or are they free to move? Knowing these answers is what allows the pair to dance smoothly and communicate effectively, and allows for easy and clean adaptation to unexpected changes, missed cues, and other unexpected things, to the point where your reaction will look effortless and fully part of the plan.

I said above that the process will be cyclical, but I'll start with an initial lead. The Leader has some idea of what they want to happen next, might be just a step, might be something a little more involved like a *sacada*, or might be something fancy like a *colgada*. They communicate their intention to the Follower as best they can, through movements in the chest and frame of the embrace. Then, the Follower 'reads' that intent and steps to the best of their understanding. At this point, the Leader has not yet taken any steps. Instead, they should wait until the Follower has started their movement and the Leader has a read on how the Follower is moving. At this point, the Leader reacts and takes their own steps, if any.

It's useful to keep this last point in mind as its own step, think of a dance as a conversation, not a monologue. In less abstract terms, the Leader's step needs to be a reaction to what the Follower did, regardless of whether that was what the Leader was aiming for. This reaction can often meld into the next element that is Lead, resulting in a fulfilling back and forth between the dancers, and beautiful figures to anyone watching.

For each of these figures, make sure to practice them. First practice them in isolation, then (where relevant) practice getting into and out of the pattern, and then start to experiment with other ways to vary them. In addition to using these boxes for specific ways to practice a given figure other than just doing it, I'll co-opt these boxes for suggestions of variations.

2.2 Walking

Most Tango dancers will agree that walking is the core and most common figure in all of tango. If you're not good at walking you will have trouble with more advanced things, and especially with finding partners to dance with you. Don't step on your partner's feet!

Okay, the most basic figure - walking. As a tango figure, there's no core difference between regular walking and walking in a dance. But there are plenty of details. The most obvious are that you want to maintain your posture and embrace with your partner. Then there's the whole idea of not just walking towards (or away from) your partner, but actually leading your Follow to walk with you. I'll assume that you want to walk forward.

First thing is to make sure that your own weight is clearly on one foot, and to know and feel that the Follow's weight is clearly on the matching foot. As the lead, shift your weight forward, while staying on the same foot, maintaining your posture to communicate that forward shift to the Follow through the embrace. As you feel their free leg step backwards, you can also extend your free leg forward. Once you've gotten the size of the step you want, stop moving your free leg, and shift your weight, while also communicating that weight shift to your Follow. Then, collect your dragging leg, which is now free, and collect. To continue walking, just smoothly continue the motion from collecting and repeat on the other side.

While these steps might come across as being strictly sequential and robotic, there's really a lot of overlap, and some of the steps happen really quickly.

2.3 Side-steps

Much like regular walking, you want to start when your weighted foot is matched to your partner's. In this case we'll assume that the lead is on their right foot, and the Follower is on their left. Start by leading the extension of the free leg out to your left (shifting your weight within your weighted foot), transfer your weight, and collect your feet. At this point, you have some options.

- 1) If you want to sidestep back to where you just came from, you again lead the leg extension, this time to your right, shift weight and collect. However, this generally isn't all that interesting or useful.

- 2) If you want to keep sidestepping in the same direction, then instead of extending your right foot to go back to where you just came from, you need to shift your weight, and lead your Follow to do the same while your feet are collected so that you are in the same position that you started in. Try doing this a few times in sequence. Then try varying the step size and speed of the steps.

2.4 Rock Step

Rock steps are pretty common in most dances, and it's really quite simple. It's basically where you take a step and then immediately shift your weight back to where it was, without collecting your feet. You can optionally pick up the foot that is briefly free before shifting your weight back, if you like the aesthetic. Done correctly, a rock step feels a little like a bouncy motion, and makes for an easy way to accent your dance or to quickly reverse direction.

2.5 Walk Outside Left/Right

In addition to regular walking with your partner, there are also a couple variations. These variations are not just for themselves, but are also bases for many other more complicated figures.

One of these variations is the idea of walking to the outside of your partner, where your partner is offset, but still walking in the same direction, and still walking so that your weight is matched. When your weight is on your right foot, the Follow's foot is on their left. While walking this way, your shoulders, and those of your partner will be turned relative to the direction of your hips.

There are a couple of ways to get into this mode of walking. The simplest is to start with a side step, where your step is a little bit bigger than the Follow's step. To make sure that this isn't confusing for the

Follow, you need to make sure that your chest is pointed towards your Follow, even as they are forward and to the side of you. Once you've finished the side step, just start walking forward or backward.

The second method is to find that angle without the sidestep, and instead just start with a rotation. Make sure your feet are matched. If you're planning to have the Follow to your right, you'll probably want to keep your weight on your left foot, then lead a rotation towards the left (without leading any steps yet), until the Follow's feet are entirely to the outside of your right foot - again, make sure to keep your chest pointed towards them.

Then you can just start walking forward, in the direction that your feet are pointing, not your chest. To get out of this, then you just need to step in front of the Follow's matching foot on each of your next two steps. Alternately, you can reverse either of the other two methods - either lead a side step and take a bigger one yourself so that you are back in front of the Follow, or pause and rotate a little, so that you are once again aligned.

Try experimenting with this, and make a dance just out of the elements you've learned so far. Start with some walking, shift to some side and rock steps, and find a time to walk to the outside at a dramatically appropriate moment. Don't fix yourself to any particular order of doing things, try to find different ways to do each figure from each of the other figures. That goes for all the upcoming figures too.

2.6 Walk Cross System

And then there's a style of walking where despite facing opposite each other and walking in the same direction, both of you are on your left foot or both are on your right. People don't often just walk in this way for an extended period, it's instead a foundational element that a lot of other figures incorporate and build from. But don't take that to mean that you *can't* just walk this way, especially when getting comfortable with the idea.

There are three main methods (two of which are closely related to the above section) that I'll describe here for getting into cross system when matched, but the connecting factor is taking a step, or more correctly shifting your weight without leading your partner to do the same. Of course you could also lead them to step/weight shift while you don't, but I think that's a little harder. Something to experiment with.

Maybe try a little experimenting to find ways to do it, even before reading the rest of the section.

As with walking to the outside, you can start with a sidestep, though it doesn't need to be as large. You're not aiming to be fully offset from your Follow, just kinda, half-offset. Usually the sidestep is to the left, in which case you should end up with your right foot aligned with the Follow's right foot. On its own, this doesn't get you into cross system, the real trick is that you have to shift your weight after collecting, but before stepping forward, while making sure that the Follow *doesn't* shift weight. Then, just take a step forward or back, you're in cross system.

And of course, you can get into it with a rotation. Start so that you are both on your right foot, whether that's from starting matched and shifting into it, or by any other means. Then, as before, rotate slightly so that your right feet are in line with each other, and start walking forward or backward. Again, make sure that your chest is slightly twisted relative to your hips so that your chest is pointed towards your partner.

The last method that I'm going to mention is something that you can use while walking normally. So, while walking and once your weight is on your left foot, you're going to take a quick stutter step without leading the Follow to do the same. Basically, as your left foot is going through collection, quickly change

weight, and step forward and slightly to the left with your left foot, again keeping your chest pointed slightly to the side so that you face your Follow. And then just keep walking.

Of course, once in a cross system, you also need to be able to get out of it. Probably the simplest is to redo the stutter step. While collecting your left foot, with your weight on your right foot (the one that is aligned with the Follow's foot), quickly shift your weight onto your left foot, and off of your right. And immediately step forward with your newly freed right foot, and place it in line with the Follow's left foot, which is stepping. You can also experiment with adapting or reversing the other methods.

Again, try making a dance out of this and the figures already covered. Experiment, focus on combining the elements and transitioning between things, and making all the movements smooth. This is something you'll want to do for pretty much all of these - after all, the point is to be able to improvise a dance, might as well start now, and incorporate things as early and often as possible.

2.7 Backward Ocho

Ochos are where things really start to get complicated. There are many many different variations to play around with, and often, when correctly adjusted, they can turn into other figures entirely. The basic element is that the Follow is going to be stepping backwards through a kind of figure 8, while staying facing the Lead.

In the interest of keeping things simple, though, we'll start with the most common - the back ocho (for the Follower). The crucial first step, which will prove to be useful in many many cases, is in transitioning from a matched stance (e.g. Leader is standing on their left foot while the Follower is on their right), to cross system (e.g. both are on their left).

To do this, we're going to start standing matched on the Lead's right foot, and take a side step to the Lead's left. Then, the lead is going to shift weight after collecting their feet, but is not going to lead a weight shift for the follow, so that both partners are on their right foot. As you shift weight, you need to also start leading your follow to rotate counterclockwise, so that their free leg (still collected) rotates behind them. Then, smoothly lead a step to your left, and lead the Follow to also take a step, so that they are stepping behind themselves. Once you have completed the step, collect, but do not shift your weight. Instead, smoothly lead the follow to rotate again around their standing leg, this time clockwise. Keep taking sidesteps back and forth, leading a rotation at the completion of each one, and you're doing basic ochos.

You can also lead forward ochos, by leading the Follow to rotate so that their free leg is instead in front of them when they take a step. Experiment with different options - try switching between backward and forward ochos (lead the rotation, and reverse the rotation before the step). Try moving forward and backward while doing ochos, where you're not stepping directly to the side. Try leading your steps to the right larger than to the left, or vice versa. Also try varying up what your own steps are.

2.8 Molinete

A molinete is basically where the Follow steps in a circle around the Lead, alternating between sidesteps, front steps, and back steps. This is going to involve a lot of the skills from ochos. And the main thing to learn is how to lead steps without taking steps yourself.

Since the molinete is completely cyclical, you can enter and exit it basically at any point. But for simplicity, let's start matched. Remember that exercise for rotating around your partner's axis from the rotation section? You'll be leading the Follow to do that. First, lead the Follow to take a sidestep (not

too big), and try to lead it so that it goes slightly around you, rather than directly to their side. From there, you'll lead the Follow to take a forward step, which if you look at it a little differently is almost indistinct from being a front ocho, followed by a rotation to re-align, side step, and rotate into a back ocho, and repeat. It's really just leading someone through that rotation exercise mentioned before.

After leading a couple of the Follow's steps, you'll soon run into the problem of figuring out how *you* can keep rotating so that you are facing them, so that you can keep leading the dance. Not to worry, it isn't tough. When first figuring things out, it might be easiest and simplest to just kinda shuffle your feet with small rotating steps. It doesn't look great, but right now we're just trying to get the lead working. Once you're comfortable with that, you can take on the better looking version. And it probably makes sense to practice this on its own a bit. For that you'll stand on the ball of one foot (you'll be staying on the same leg throughout), usually the one opposite the direction you are leading the molinete (if the Follow is going to your left, your weight is on your right foot). To rotate, put a little weight into the toe of your free foot, maybe six inches to the side of your standing foot. From there, push off of your toe to rotate on your standing leg - be sure to lift up the heel of the 'paddling' foot enough that your standing foot can rotate underneath it. When you can't rotate any further, and your shins are bumping into each other, just stop pushing from your toe, sweep the free leg in front of you and in a bit of a circle diagonally backward (this is a bit of decoration to the reset motion) to reset the position of your foot.

Chapter 4

Social Elements

1 Improvement

Okay, so you've learned how to move, how to hold a good embrace, and you've learned some of the basic figures. What now? Now you're in the step of actually dancing with people, making mistakes, and riffing from other ideas that you see or improvise.

1.1 Mistakes

First thing - you are going to make mistakes, especially as a beginner. Even when very experienced, you will still make mistakes. If you can maintain the humility to pay attention to them and work on them, these can be the best way for you to improve, so long as you commit the effort.

When starting, mistakes might mean that you're getting tangled up without knowing what to do, or that you're in a position you don't know how to move on from, or you forget a sequence, or maybe you find your partner or yourself off-balance. For a long time after, mistakes will often just be that the Follower didn't do the sequence that you'd intended to lead.

It helps to have a partner or group to regularly dance, just for the purpose of ironing out those mistakes. Might be an irregularity in how you lead rotations, or something off with your balance, or maybe something about your posture is throwing you and/or your partner off. When diagnosing a particular issue, really dig into what the root cause of it is, and work out a way to avoid it.

"But Bryce," I hear you exclaim *"when I'm in the middle of dancing with someone socially, I don't want to take 20 minutes working things out every time I make a mistake!"* You're right, and your dance partner probably wouldn't appreciate it either. When these happen, the trick is to have the confidence, fluidity, and adaptability to pivot your mistake to some other figure (maybe an entirely new one), without anyone else being the wiser. To practice this, don't just stop and reset when you see/feel something happen that you didn't intend - instead just keep dancing and find a way to continue, even if that's just reversing time on the stuff you just did. As you develop your dancing vocabulary and learn to improvise this will get easier and easier. Soon you'll have a dance where you identify four or five mistakes, and your partner or someone watching will comment on how smooth and flawless your dancing was.

1.2 Learning from Others

Of course, there are ways to improve without making mistakes, you can take classes, learn by talking and getting advice/coaching from other dancers, and by observing dancers live or in video.

When learning by any of these methods, it perhaps goes without saying that it's not enough to just let yourself be enraptured by the movement - you have to practice it yourself. But, when watching, pay close attention to where the dancer's weight is and when/how they shift it. This will be what you are trying to do with your own weight. Make sure that as you do it you can maintain all your good habits, especially keeping yourself balanced and keep connected to your partner. My most general advice for any figure you learn is to improvise with it, adapt it, and integrate it with your dancing and other figures. Don't let it be a lone figure, learn to incorporate it seamlessly into your dancing.

If you're taking classes, then aside from following the lessons, try to follow the general advice. Take the opportunity to ask questions and get extensive interactive feedback. It can be helpful to ask them to repeat a given figure a few times, so that you can focus on different aspects each time - the embrace, where they shift their weight, the timing, rotations, etc. Take advantage of the opportunity to look at a figure from multiple angles.

And of course, you can learn from other dancers any time you go social dancing, or otherwise interact with other dancers (in an appropriate context). If you see someone conduct a figure that you think looks cool or fun, you might try to ask them about it, but don't be demanding of them or of their time.

Lastly, you can also learn just by observing and practicing. You can be observing either other dancers live on the floor, or you can watch videos, both are great sources. All the same general advice applies. The key advantage of a video is that you can start stop and replay segments as much as you need to try and replicate them, though some movements may be choreographed between the dancers, which can make

it harder to figure out how to improvise it. When live, it's more obvious that a given movement is not choreographed, and you can ask them.

1.3 Improvisation

The first section is focused on refining the things you already know and keeping up your spirits as you get onto the dance floor more often. The second section is focused on continually learning from others and looking for sources of inspiration and new ways to think about things. But this section is really about the meat of dancing - this is the fun beyond just doing something that others invented and still others find impressive. This is where you develop your own style, experiment, get creative, and express yourself. This is where your dancing becomes different from everyone else.

It's hard to lay out a process for improvising, so the core advice is to just do it. Try things and be okay with them not working, especially at first. Like in the mistakes section, try to take a little time to workshop it if you need to figure it out.

2 Etiquette

2.1 Asking For A Dance

In most dances, if you want to dance with someone, you walk up to them and ask them (politely). While this is an option in tango, the more traditional and more suave approach is the use the *cabaceo*. Basically, this is just making eye contact with someone you'd like to dance with, when you'd like to dance with them, while walking towards them. It often helps to give a little nod or other gesture to make sure that your intent is coming across and that they're actually looking at you. If they want to dance with you, they should be walking towards you while maintaining eye contact, which creates this illusion of two people just spontaneously coming together for a dance. A few notes, though. If either person intentionally looks away or breaks the eye contact, it's off. One of the main advantages is that it takes off a lot of the social and peer pressure to accept an invitation, since almost no one else can tell that you're being invited at all.

2.2 Floorcraft

There are several bits of information that you are expected to know when you go social dancing in a public space. Done properly, these allow each pair to dance without getting in the way of anyone else.

Firstly, the dance progresses in a counter-clockwise direction around the dance floor.

Secondly, try to stay around the edge, that is where people are expected to spend most of the time. The center is for people who want to spend a little time doing something really fancy or show off.

Thirdly, make sure to give space to the dancers around you, and as a Leader, pay special attention to where it looks like other dancers are going so that you don't collide. I've made this mistake too many times. As part of paying attention, make eye contact with other Leaders around you to nonverbally acknowledge each other and communicate spacing.

To expand on that third point:

1. If the person ahead of you is stopped or going too slowly for your liking, do not pass around them, instead just do some figures in place, or move more slowly.
2. Always keep a safe distance to the couple ahead of you in the line of dance, giving them enough space to easily execute a turn.
3. If the distance to the couple in front becomes large, try to catch up in order to not block the couples behind you.
4. Don't move backwards to invade the space that belongs to the couple behind you.
5. Always adapt your movements to the density of the crowd. So avoid big movements when the floor is densely packed or there are others near you.
6. If, despite all your precautions, you are involved in a collision, keep your cool and apologize with grace.

2.3 Dance Duration

During a social dance, the music will usually be played in groups of three to five songs in the same musical style, called a *tanda*. The different *tandas* are separated by a short section of non-dancing music called a *cortina*. The convention and expectation is that when you accept a dance with someone, you will finish the full *tanda*. You don't need to accept a dance with someone at the beginning of the *tanda*, and so can wait until there's only one or two songs left to start dancing with someone in the event that you don't feel up to multiple dances. There's no obligation to continue dancing with them after the *tanda* is over.

When you're done dancing with someone, it's expected that you'll thank them and traditionally, the Leader will walk the Follower back to their seat. Note - thanking someone is the signal that you're done dancing with them, so be careful about sending an unintended message that you don't want to dance any more.

3 Musicality & Music

There are five main genres of tango music, broken into the camps of traditional music, and the more modern music. It can be a little confusing, since some of the names are also words for other things, but that's just how it is. The traditional types are *Tango* (4/4 time), *Vals* (3/4 time), and *Milonga* (2/4 time). The modern types are *Nuevo* and *Alternativo*.

Musicality is a big, perhaps the main, part of where tango stops being a series of mechanical movements and where it becomes an art form. It's the tone and feeling of the tango conversation at each moment. Basically it's matching the movements of your dance to what the music is doing. Everyone will do it differently, but it's easy to recognize when it's done well once you have a basic level of comfort with common steps and how to make some variations from them.

There are no hard rules here. Think about how you might dance to sharp attacks, periods of building tension, or even just pay close attention to a particular instrument when you next listen to music, and imagine what kinds of movements would go well with it. Syncopation can be a lot of fun. If the song is fast, try dancing at half the speed and see how that feels. Alternately, if the song is slow, or even normal tempo, try doubling it.

3.1 Tango

A tango song is performed in 4/4 time, meaning that every other beat is strong, but not as strong as in a Milonga. Strong beats are good times to make big or important steps in your dancing. This means that it's well balanced between the pace of the song and the pauses, so you can dance tango just about however you like to this kind of music. Slow and dramatic, snappy, sweepy, or mix it up.

3.2 Vals

The *vals* is performed in 3/4 time, which means that every third beat is strong, rather than every other beat like in a Tango or a Milonga. With more time between those big steps, you can take a little more time to go through a figure, or generally spend a little less time on transitions between things, and instead have more continuous and fluid movement. Dances tend to have somewhat longer steps, and be a little more sweepy than sharp and snappy with lots of rotations.

3.3 Milonga

2/4 time, faster paced, distinctive rhythm. Smaller, faster, simpler steps. Less rotation Milongas are the fastest paced songs, both because of their 2/4 time and their general tempo. The 2/4 time means that every other beat is strong, and is stronger than what you'll find in a Tango. It also has a distinctive rhythm that is difficult to put in words. Go to an event and ask someone who is experienced to sound it out for you. With more strong beats and a faster pace, the Milonga is, predictably, danced faster. Because of this faster pace, movements tend to be snappier, sharper, and shorter, and also somewhat simpler. One element of this is that there tends to be less (not none) rotation when dancing a Milonga, and fewer moves that require rotations. You *can* do it of course, but make sure that you're not straining your Follower too much or they won't dance with you again.

3.4 Nuevo

Music made with tango in mind, but often featuring elements or loads of electronic music Tango Nuevo is music made with traditional music in mind, but incorporating a lot of modern elements, like electronic music and distortions. It's probably most closely related to Tango in terms of how you dance it, but I'm sure there are plenty of Nuevo Vals' too.

3.5 Alternativo

This isn't really a genre, so much as a catch-all term for everything else that you might try to dance tango to. There's really nothing stopping you from dancing to whatever you want to try, but you may find that some genres work better than others. Tango can be danced to anything. Jazz, electronic, metal, classical, disney songs, rap, rock, try it all.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

1 Conclusion

Practicing

I know it can be a drag to hear, but the way to get good at Tango, like any other skill, is to practice. Practice drilling some of the basic movements to develop flexibility, balance, stability, and range of motion. But don't turn dancing into a chore - that's just another reason that I've tried to put so much emphasis on improvising and experimenting - it takes something from a rote practice, to something that is fun. It's purely happenstance that doing so also improves your familiarity, your creativity, fluidity, and adaptability.

Quick note on mistakes that I think is worth reiterating: If you find yourself trying to explain to the Follow what they should be doing, especially repeatedly, try to take some time to really drill down to the source of it, and figure out what *you* can do to lead it better in the future. As the lead, you carry the bulk of the responsibility for effectively communicating your intent.

Finding Dances

As mentioned previously, a social Tango dancing event is called a milonga, and tango is pretty popular in a lot of cities, so a google search may turn up some good results. They are often paired with a lesson beforehand, which might be a good way to get your feet wet and connect up with the larger community. Probably the main other term is called a Practica, which is still in a group, but is less social, and really more geared towards working on figures and ironing out recurring or common issues.

Takeaways

The basic goal here is to teach you enough of tango that you can go to a social dance, dance with someone you haven't met before, and incrementally improve for the rest of your tango career. So, hopefully you've learned some basic terms to talk with others, you've learned some of the etiquette to ask for and navigate a dancing environment, and you've learned how figures are built and some basic figures to get you started.

As a technically minded person, I particularly hope that you find the minute breakdown of the movements useful, since some of those answers took ages to figure out. As a result, I think that is the section that you will need to read and re-read the most. More than that, though, I hope that the technical breakdown of the pieces of the movements, combined with the frequent urges to improvise and modify the figures you learn and dance with will spur your own creativity, delight, and self expression.