Hunter McCurry

Social Dance 3

Winter 2012

Combinatorial Tango

Of all the dance forms we looked at in Social Dance 3, my opinion of tango has grown more than any other over the course of the last quarter. I was initially somewhat indifferent towards it, but during the week or two that we covered it in class my feelings changed rapidly. I now find it to be one of the most fun and engaging social dances, in part because it is very rewarding to lead and has great potential for lining up with musical changes of mood and phrasing.

After Social Dance 1, I had a basic understanding of how the dance worked and knew many of the steps. But nothing about it grabbed me. It lacked the excitement and momentum of swing and salsa, while also missing the smoothness and simplicity of a waltz. It was blocky and rigid, and it felt like stringing long choreographed segments together rather than creatively and spontaneously choosing moves that felt natural together. I was simply choosing a sequence and going through the motions, then repeating.

My change of heart came suddenly and caught me by surprise. Somewhere during the two classes in which we covered grapevine and cross-over steps, it occurred to me how much flexibility and fluidity the dance can have. A single crossing step can lead in many different directions and becomes a branching point. Ochos, rotating in place, the three “phrase-ending steps”, dips: all of these can follow smoothly from that first initial step. Armed with this knowledge, the tango is not simply a list of one- and two-bar choreographed dance phrases lined up in chunks, but a sea of genetic material of various lengths, combining and branching on the fly. Each sequence has the possibility of inserting itself within another sequence, splitting apart, or morphing smoothly into another. The timings of phrases are not fixed but flexible, with the possibility of tagging on filler material to end with a musical cadence.

Importantly, there are also various types of moves, which feel quite different from each other and can easily be associated with changes in the music. Rotating or rocking in place moves have a certain delicacy and can serve to heighten the sense of excitement or expectation. For a faster and more dynamic feel there are traveling steps such as pivots or grapevines. And clearly there are dips, which add a very satisfying flourish and styling, especially when placed at the ends of musical phrases.

Adding all this together, there is a remarkable amount of freedom and creativity when it comes to leading the tango. The rhythmic flexibility, branching points and wide variety of dance phrase types ensures that phrases of the music can be matched on the fly, even when things don’t lie in perfect 4/4 bars and phrases.