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Why We Don't Just Dance to a Metronome: Examining the Musical Characteristics of American Rhythm and Smooth

Tommy Endicott

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Why We Don't Just Dance to a Metronome: Examining the Musical Characteristics of American Rhythm and Smooth Annotated Bibliography

American Smooth and Rhythm are the fastest growing styles of ballroom dance in America, and as new ideas for how to perform the dances flood the dance floor, so do new ideas for what music best expresses the character of the dance. The music of American Smooth is trending towards electronic forms of the tango and towards pop ballads in place of traditional Viennese Waltzes; meanwhile, the music of American Rhythm is trending away from its Cuban roots and towards hip hop. These innovations could potentially revitalize ballroom dance music for new audiences and also help dancers to reach a new height of expression by being able to better connect with the music. However, the dance community potentially risks losing some of the character that belongs to a dance by ignoring central aspects of the traditional music. Thinking about this will help to understand how the music adds to the character of the dance. After all, we know that music does more than solely keep time for dancers: otherwise, we would all just dance to a metronome.

DanceSport Competition Videos

1. Brockert Team Brockert. "United States American Smooth Finals 1985." YouTube Video. 22 Dec 2016. <https://youtu.be/SEYu0SD2GmI>.

The channel that posted this video is not a DanceSport-specific channel. However, by cross-referencing the awards ceremony at the end of the video with the National Dance Council of America's list of national champions, it is possible to verify that this is a video of the 1985 US National Championship American Smooth Finals.

This video helps to pinpoint exactly what American ballroom music sounded like when it was first starting to be competed on a large scale (the first ever US National Championships for all styles of ballroom dance were held in 1984). The music played for Smooth Tango is an arrangement of the tango classic *Olé Guapa*, which features a lush string section characteristic of *tango-romántico*. The overall rhythmic character is *marcato*, and it has a strong emphasis on the syncopated habanera rhythm (mentioned by Béhague as one of the defining rhythms of tango itself), which are traditional characteristics of *tango-milonga*. Meanwhile, the music played for Smooth Viennese Waltz is a traditional style waltz tune featuring a prominent and staccato 'boom-chick-chick' accompaniment pattern. When compared to the music played for International Standard Tango and Viennese Waltz during the same year, the types of music are identical, making a strong case that the musical characters for Smooth and Standard were thought of as similar to each other at the time.

2. Desert Classic Dancesport Championships. "2012 Desert Classic Rising Star American Smooth Final - Ballroom Dance Video." YouTube Video. 5 Aug 2012. <https://youtu.be/GlmDbqgtY-Q>.

The Desert Classic Dancesport Championships are an event sanctioned by the National Dance Council of America (NDCA), which is the organizing faction for most major professional ballroom competitions in the US. The event garnered well over 200 entries in 2012, meaning the music played was heard by a wide audience. The video is posted by the event's official YouTube page, easily verifying it.

By 2012, electronic tango and pop ballads were starting to take over the music of American Smooth. The tango music played for this final features sampled bandoneon, electronic drum loops, and multi-tracked auto-tuned vocals. The syncopations also sound more influenced by Cuban percussion with an emphasis on counts 2 and 4 (similar to Mambo) than by habanera rhythms. The song played for Viennese waltz is Christina Perri's *A Thousand Years*. This song's presence in a ballroom final in 2012 is significant because the song was only released in 2011. Originally a track in the movie *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn — Part 1*, the song exploded in popularity during late 2011, eventually reaching number 31 on *Billboard* Hot 100; meaning that within one year the song found its way from the movies and pop hits radio stations to the ballroom dance competition floor.

3. Happifruit. "America's Ballroom Challenge 2005 - American Smooth Group Dances." YouTube Video. 21 Sep 2009. https://youtu.be/wdmR_57et3U.

The channel that posted this video is not a DanceSport-specific channel. However, it is identifiable as a broadcast of the 2005 Ohio Star Ball (OSB) Professional Smooth Finals (aired on television under the name America's Ballroom Challenge), which can be verified by the placement of couples during the awards ceremony. Although OSB is not the official US national ballroom championship, it is arguably the largest competition in the US for both professional and amateur level dancers, and dance DJs often will play the latest and greatest dance tracks during final rounds.

What is notable about this competition is that the music for tango and Viennese waltz changed relatively little over the 20 years since the 1985 finals. The large string section in the tango is still reminiscent of *tango-romántico*, and it features a bandoneon laying down a strong *marcato* march rhythm characteristic of early tangos. A solo piano waltz is played for the Viennese waltz, and although it is not a fully orchestrated classical waltz, it still has a strong emphasis on the left-hand accompaniment. 2005 was right on the cusp of American Smooth exploding into its own unique genre with extravagant choreography and innovative music, which is even apparent in the change in costuming: men began to ditch their stiff tailcoats in favor of more trendy dinner jackets or even fully colored mahogany suits. This video shows American Smooth at this transition point, where the music is still mostly traditional, but the choreography and character of the dance were starting to push expressive boundaries of the music, asking for more innovation.

Dictionary / Encyclopedia Articles

4. Béhague, Gerard. "Tango." *Grove Music Online*. Edited by Deane Root. 20 Jan 2001. <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.

Béhague was recognized as the leading scholar on Latin American Music by the end of his life. He was editor of the journal *Ethnomusicology* from 1974-1978, and he founded and edited the journal *Latin American Music Review*, meaning that he oversaw the publishing of a number of articles relevant to the field of Latin ballroom music, including the article by Greco and Cano mentioned below. Béhague traces the origins of the tango to a combination of Cuban Danzón, Habanera, and Milonga elements. He lists three different types of tango in the early 20th century and names examples of specific pieces and artists for each. He references a number of different tango-specific researchers to support his claims.

Perhaps the most relevant information in this article is the characterizations Béhague notes for different styles of tango: while the *tango-milonga* is “strictly instrumental” and has a “strong rhythmic character” defined by the staccato accompaniment, *tango-cancion* was popularized by movies and the radio, and it “is always vocal with instrumental accompaniment and has a strong sentimental character.” Béhague also references the claim of tango scholar Julio Mafud that much of tango’s choreography is symbolic of elements of life in the *barrios*, the slums of Buenos Aires, such as the folk hero archetype of the *compadrito*, knife fights, and active brothels. This presents the interesting question: ‘Do the changing choreography and music of modern tango reflect more on aspects of *modern* life in Argentina, or do they focus more on harkening back to the nostalgia of the early 20th century?’ Such a question might be amply answered by Mercedes Liska, whose research focuses on the development of queer tango circles in Buenos Aires.

5. Powers, Richard. “Tango (ii).” *Grove Music Online*. Edited by Deane Root. 31 Jan 2014. <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.

While Powers is not a musicologist, he is an award-winning novelist who has been acknowledged to explore the science of how music effects the brain in his works. His entry was published in Grove Music Online in 2014, 13 years after Béhague’s entry. The sources listed in Powers’ entry are almost all research on tango done between 2000-2010, suggesting that the second entry was needed to update the original after Béhague passed away. Compared to Béhague’s article on tango, also published in Grove, Powers notes more uncertainty on the dance’s origins. However, he does note the cultural significance of life in the *barrios*, primarily among disenfranchised immigrants. The connection to poor European immigrants is significant because it helps to explain why the bandoneón, an instrument that went out of style in Europe and thus was imported to the Americas for cheap, was used so commonly in tango music—popular enough to become so central to the identity of tango that its sound would be sampled and used in electronic tangos a century later, even after many other elements of traditional tango were discarded. Powers also notes that competitive ballroom tango “accumulated many small changes each year as competitors strove to surpass one another. With each change came protests against the new distortions that threatened to destroy the classic dance, including the many modifications made in Buenos Aires, but the changes seemed only to help the tango by revitalizing it.”

Scholarly Journal Articles

6. Greco, María Emilia and Rubén López Cano. “Evita, el Che, Gardel y el gol de Victorino: Funciones y significados del sampleo en el tango electrónico.” *Latin American Music Review* 35 no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2014): 228-259.

Greco and Cano’s article was published in the scholarly, peer-review journal *Latin American Music Review*, which, at the time of this issue, was edited by Gerard Béhague, the author of one of the Grove entries on Tango. Béhague states that tango’s instrumentation helps to distinguish itself from other forms of Latin American folk music. The timbre of the bandoneón is unmistakable and relatively unique to the Rio de la Platte region of South America where there is a larger German demographic, which partially explains the instrument’s prevalence. Greco and Lopez in this article, along with Liska in her book, all acknowledge that electronic tango maintains its identity within the tango genre by using samples of traditional tangos, and the

bandoneon is usually featured heavily. This suggests that the instrument itself continues to be symbolistic of tango.

Interestingly, three of the major artists discussed, Bajofondo, Gotan; and Tanghetto, are all listed on Dance Vision's Smooth Tango playlist, and one of Bajofondo's tracks, *Pa Bailar*, is frequently played for Smooth Tango at competitions; the fact that these artists are mentioned in common by these sources helps to cement them as influential to the tango scene in Argentina and in the US. Additionally, Greco and Cano cite that "the electronic tango first appeared in the early 2000s and rapidly spread." This confirms the timeline of electronic tango first starting to appear in American Smooth around 2005.

Secondary or Tertiary Monographs

7. Heaton, Alma. *Ballroom Dance Rhythms*. Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1973.

Brigham Young University is one of a few schools in the country that offers a degree in Ballroom Dance. At the time of the book's publishing, BYU held a its Ten-Stake Dance Festival for students to participate in, and it continues to be a center for DanceSport competition today, hosting the U.S. National Amateur DanceSport Championships in 2022. Heaton himself had a number of years of professional training through Arthur Murray studios before opening his own private dance studio himself. He taught at two universities before arriving at BYU, taught for Dance Masters of America, and was chairman of the American Health Association, Physical Education and Recreation Dance Forms Section. All of the above qualify Heaton to discuss techniques for dancing. *Ballroom Dance Rhythms* may be slightly misleading title when using modern dance jargon, as the text uses 'dance rhythms' interchangeably with 'dance figures' or 'dance steps'. The book is formatted as a class syllabus for the teacher of BYU's Physical Education 180 – Social Dance class. It includes a suggested outline for class structure; an extended glossary of dance terms covering dance positions, foot movements, weight changes, and leading; fundamental lessons on posture, etiquette, and styling; and detailed dance lessons on twelve different social dances.

In the entry *Waltz Rhythms*, Heaton lists only three styles of waltz explicitly: American, International, and Viennese – which was not specified to have an American and International style as it does today. Based on a number of clues including tempo suggestions, dance positions, and styling suggestions, it seems that at the time of publication, at least at BYU, Viennese Waltz was danced with elements of American styling including breaking from closed position, yet it still maintained the staccato quality of the traditional Viennese Waltz. This conclusion matches the type of dancing seen at the second-ever US American Smooth Finals in 1985 (12 years after the final edition of this book), and it gives a point of reference for comparing the modern trends of Smooth Viennese Waltz and its music.

8. Liska, Mercedes. *Argentine Queer Tango: Dance and Sexuality Politics in Buenos Aires*. Translated by Peggy Westwell and Pablo Vila. London: Lexington Books, 2017.

Mercedes Liska is an ethnomusicologist on faculty at the University of Buenos Aires, and she was a tango dancer for many years before beginning her research on the subject. While she does not hold a degree in music, her Doctorate is in Social Sciences. This book is published as part of the series *Music, Culture, and Identity in Latin America* which has two editors: Pablo Vila and Héctor Fernández l'Hoeste. The former is a Professor of Sociology at Temple University, and the latter is a Professor of World Languages and Cultures at Georgia State University as well

as the coeditor of two books on Latin American music. The three of these authors are well qualified to discuss the broader cultural issues of Argentine queer tango, and l’Hoeste’s musical expertise brings enough credibility to support Liska’s claims about tango music specifically.

In chapter 3, Liska discusses how electronic tango became popular in tango clubs in Buenos Aires. Her main argument is that “a reciprocal relationship grew between the queer and the electronic tangos” because “both were peripheral to the traditional tango”. She examines a number of the popular electronic tango artists (particularly imagery depicted in music videos) to draw her connections. Liska’s first-person experience of electronic tango in both queer and traditional tango spaces in Buenos Aires is a crucial link to understanding why its influence is heard in the music of American Smooth. Unlike International Tango, Smooth Tango incorporates elements of Argentine Tango and other modern dance genres, so it makes sense that as dancers integrate elements of contemporary Argentine Tango, the music would follow suit.

Streaming Playlists

9. Dance Vision. *Cha Cha | American Rhythm*. Streaming audio Playlist. Accessed 1 Nov 2022. <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/33nymUVRI6kVUA2fdbBDue>.

Dance Vision is the premiere online learning platform for ballroom dance in the US. Most importantly, they have published the Dance Vision International Dancers Association (DVIDA) syllabus, which includes regulations and permissible figures to be danced at any level for non-open competitive DanceSport dances. Additionally, they have an extensive video library of instructional videos produced by some championship-winning professional dancers. Since Dance Vision holds the authority to dictate how ballroom is being danced today, it would make sense that they also have the authority to suggest what music is appropriate for certain styles.

It is clear that this playlist is much more influenced by pop and hip hop compared to Dance Vision’s playlist for International Cha Cha. Four songs which have appeared on the US top 50 charts in the last 10 years are featured: Robin Thicke’s *Blurred Lines*, Lizzo’s *Boys and Juice*, and Bruno Mars’ *Uptown Funk*, none of which sound like the Mambo-derived cha chas described by Béhague in his Grove article. These hip hop inspired cha chas do not include any elements of a Cuban rhythm section, and there is no sense of intertwining *tumbaos*. This playlist helps to confirm that music for American Rhythm is heading in a separate direction when compared to International Latin: towards pop/hip hop and away from traditional Cuban music.

10. ———. *Tango | American Smooth*. Streaming audio playlist. Accessed 1 Nov 2022. <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3jeaJ6dfdVtjHMa9qx6tlq>.

This playlist engages directly with other sources on electronic tango by including tracks from Bajofondo, Tanghetto, and Gotan. Every single track includes some aspect of electronic music: be it pumping synthesized drum set beats in *Heart Upon My Sleeve*, grooving accordion loops in *Inmigrante*, or soaring club-style synthesizer riffs in *Ascendance*. By publishing this playlist, Dance Vision is clearly arguing that American Smooth Tango should be danced to some form of electronic tango. Additionally, it is notable that almost every track included was released after 2010, meaning that this type of music did not exist until relatively recently, and part of the reason for its presence in American Smooth could be simply out of novelty.

11. ——— *Viennese Waltz | American Smooth*. Streaming audio playlist. Accessed 1 Nov 2022. <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7mMipia1Qrdti2JBFO5zj4>.

The music included in Dance Vision's Smooth Viennese Waltz playlist differs significantly from their Standard Viennese Waltz playlist. The first difference of note is the inclusion of pop-based tracks such as SHAED's *Once Upon A Time* and Rihanna's *Love On The Brain*, which has garnered over 980 million streams on Spotify. The playlist also includes R&B influenced tracks such as *Forget What I Said* and *At Last*. An interesting connection between the pop and R&B tracks is that they tend to have their own unique style of waltz accompaniment. While the traditional waltz accompaniment consists of three quarter note pulses in a measure of 3/4 (first pulse from a lower voice, the second two pulses from a higher voice), pop and R&B ballads tend to phrase across two measures of three, stretching out an arpeggio across 6 pulses. The result is an arcing line that still moves up and down but in a much smoother manner than the traditional staccato waltz accompaniment. This newer style of accompaniment would seem to match the more liquid movements of current American Smooth choreography, and it presents a meaningful distinction between the two styles of Viennese Waltz. Finally, the playlist does include several instrumental tracks, especially Helen Jane Long's tracks for piano and strings; however, the chord structures and melodies are more suggestive of an intimate character than the grandeur of a fully-scored orchestral waltz.

12. ——— *Viennese Waltz | International Ballroom*. Streaming audio playlist. Accessed 1 Nov 2022. <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/296U7AKHip1KysG7mIr6P0>.

This playlist helps to establish that International Standard Viennese Waltz still holds on to many aspects of classical Viennese Waltz. Five out of twelve tracks feature a full string orchestra, keeping the traditional orchestration of the genre. Another six tracks feature solo piano, potentially suggesting the significance that classical piano waltzes have held in the genre. A commonality heard in most all of the tracks is the defining 'boom-chick-chick' waltz accompaniment pattern. The melodic shape of the pattern (low-high-high) has been acknowledged to reflect the rise and fall of the dancer's footwork (down-up-up) since as early as the 19th century, and both the music and choreography match each other in terms of staccato quality. The choreography and styling of Viennese Waltz has been preserved without alteration more so than any of the other ballroom dances, therefore it makes sense that its music would also stay relatively the same. An additional point of conversation in which this playlist engages is the inclusion of Shostakovich's *Waltz No. 2* from his Second Jazz Suite. This waltz is often played for competition and was used by Kirill Pavlov and Kristina Shinkariuk for their solo showcase performance at the 2018 WDSF World Championships.