

# Heroes of the Silver Disc

## Guidelines for successful DJing

by Melina Sedó • [www.tangodesalon.de](http://www.tangodesalon.de) • April 2006

(Slightly revised version of 2008)

The music is the heart of a tango event, it makes us dance and contributes strongly to the success of the evening. Especially for experienced dancers the music is a decisive criterion in choosing which milonga to visit and which to avoid. How often have you travelled a long way and then held on to your glass of red wine in frustration because the evening's music just didn't beckon you onto the dancefloor?

For the comfort of tango novices on the dancefloor, however, the music plays a big role, too. For them especially it is important to be able to dance without having to exert a large amount of brainpower on those wonderfully complex pieces that have neither melody nor a recognizable rhythm.

In a word: The DJ carries a huge responsibility, and organizers who just plug a CD in the player and let it run aren't doing any favours to either themselves or their guests. Of course not everybody has the time to spend years getting to know the music, but successfully doing the music for a milonga is not black magic if you just recognize some rules.

This essay is meant to mainly help young tango scenes without resident tango music experts to create an evening's musical dramaturgy. Those who begin to take a closer look at the various great orchestras of tango history will swiftly be under their spell anyway.

One more thing: I am a traditionalist where tango music is concerned. This has of course some bearing on my personal idea of what constitutes danceable, experimental or undanceable music. Naturally, everybody has their own definitions here. I do, however, ask you to consider that the tangos of the "golden era" were recorded almost exclusively as dance music, while many newer recordings have been intended for the stage (Forever Tango Orchestra), for listening (Piazzolla) or as chill-out music (Narcotango). That makes my decision easy. Beyond the question of "traditional or modern", however, there are many more factors influencing the successful progression of a milonga. Even a milonga featuring only tangos of the 1940s can be a musical disaster if choice, combination and presentation of the music are flawed.

Onward then:

1) The most important thing first: the music must always be danceable and guarantee the injury-free progress of the milonga. Very expressive or experimental music often encourages wild melees and offends tangueros who just want to dance in an intimate way.

Some experimental tandas (depending on the style of the milonga) per evening do not hurt, but they should not become too prevalent. Danceable music definitely means: the pieces have recognizable rhythm and melody and no abrupt changes of tempo.

2) The technology (records, CDs, computer) used doesn't matter. It's only important that the sound is acceptable and the DJ is skilled in the particular technology's use. Nothing is more disturbing than sudden computer crashes or a DJ who doesn't know how his equipment works. Further technical details (Which software to use? How strong do the speakers have to be?) would be beyond the scope of this article. For that, I suggest research in the Tango-DJ mailing list (see info box at the end of this article).

3) It is absolutely ok to prepare the evening's music, for example by creating playlists. One should, however, always be flexible enough to react to the current mood and the needs of the audience. The most beautiful of D'Arienzo's milongas just don't cut it if the audience consists almost exclusively of beginners - who would be better served with the slower milongas of Canaro.

4) Most experienced dancers (me too) find it absolute necessary to group the music in tandas. A tanda usually contains 4 pieces of the same orchestra, preferably featuring the same singer, of a particular epoch and certainly expressing similar moods. This way the dancers can plan to dance for a foreseeable time span with a certain chosen partner. Why? Well, maybe Man A likes to dance to Di Sarli with Woman B, and has just managed to successfully ask her to dance. He will likely be very disappointed if after a single track of that orchestra there follows a title of D'Arienzo, which he would have preferred to dance with Woman C, and which maybe Woman B doesn't like at all, because she just dislikes quick, rhythmic tangos. Now the two of them either have to stop dancing or endure a couple of less than enjoyable dances together. Such a situation can be avoided by using tandas.

5) Milonga and vals tandas may sometimes be of mixed orchestras. One should take care that the pieces pick up speed only towards the end of the tanda, or the couples may begin to leave the dancefloor after the second piece from sheer exhaustion. Milonga and vals tandas can therefore also be shorter than normal: three pieces are often sufficient to satisfy the urge to move, provided there are enough rhythmic tangos that evening.

6) Another exception: the choice of danceable tangos of the very old orchestras (Aieta, Marcucci, Brignolo, Ortiz...) is very limited. Here, it would be acceptable to mix orchestras within a tanda. Their rhythmic, rather slow style is pretty similar anyway. But: Never play more than 1 tanda of those venerable pieces per evening, since the sound quality is rather poor.

7) Tandas should follow a dramaturgy: the first piece must get the people to their feet and on the dancefloor, then maybe two interesting, but possibly lesser-known pieces can follow before ending the tanda with another real highlight so the dancers can leave the dancefloor with a nice feeling.

8) Cortinas (curtains) are short fragments of non-tango music that serve to separate the tandas, harmonize the changes between them and allow the dancers to regroup. They help avoid couples becoming inseparable and help to "mix up" the guests better. Even at milongas where people usually change partners infrequently cortinas can make sense, because "they separate the tandas musically, in essence cleaning the ear before new music can flow in. It helps me to savour the new orchestra without still having the previous one

lingering in my consciousness. It is a bit like the water at a wine tasting event." (Quote: Andreas Wichter, DJ of the Tangokombinat.) Of course, cortinas must not encourage people to dance or bore them, therefore they should not usually be longer than approximately 45 seconds.

9) A harmonious relationship of tango-milonga-vals is: 2-3 tango tandas, 1 milonga tanda, 2-3 tango tandas, 1 vals tanda.

10) For the music of the evening not to become too monotonous it is useful to regularly alternate between more stately or romantic tandas and livelier, rhythmic music, without, however, making the changes too jarring. One should especially avoid:

- directly following milongas by valeses or vice versa
- playing a milonga tanda right after a tanda of very romantic or dramatic tangos (Caló, Fresedo, Pugliese, late Di Sarli with vocals).

11) Good milongas can be found in the repertoires of Canaro (slow), Donato and D'Arienzo (quick), among others.

12) Good valeses can be found in the repertoires of Biagi, Caló, D'Arienzo (quick), Rodriguez (upbeat), Troilo, Laurenz and De Angelis (great vocals by Dante & Martel), among others.

13) The evening should have an overall dramaturgy, for example like this:

- Warm-up phase with easily danceable music (Canaro, Caló, Demare, older Di Sarli (sexteto), other older orchestras). Many beginners arrive early and want to make use of the empty dance floor. This should be considered in your choice of music.
- First high point with rhythmic highlights (D'Arienzo, Biagi, Rodriguez, Orquesta Tipica Victor) and evergreens (Fresedo, Di Sarli with Podestá or Rufino). During this phase and the next the more advanced dancers will show up. They should be challenged by more sophisticated music.
- Intermittent phase with some easier-listening music (D'Agostino, Donato, De Angelis, Tanturi) and - if necessary - an experiment (modern orchestra, electrotango, non-tango).
- The dramatic high point with Pugliese tangos, late Di Sarli (with vocals, too), rousing valeses or dramatic Biagi pieces.
- During the end-phase there should not be any experiments, people want to have a few satisfying experiences dancing and listen to their favourites. The 2 or 3 last tandas are those especially determining the emotional state people leave the milonga in. The final tanda should be tango, not vals and never milonga. Milongas should be used sparingly towards the end, anyway - most dancers will be a bit tired and want to "cuddle".
- In traditional milongas, the evening ends with some version of the Cumparsita.

14) It is considered good form to announce the final tanda so people can end their night with their favourite partner.

15) After the milonga officially ends guests like to hear some non-tangos: cuddly music by Sinatra, latin or pop music. Simply choose something that ends the night on a relaxed note and sends everybody home with music playing. Nothing is worse than: music off, lights on, chairs up. A really cold shower after every

tango dream. In Buenos Aires this is actually often done, but we don't have to imitate every bad habit, do we?

16) The most important point last: we play music for people to dance, not to satisfy our own egos. You think that has been addressed under #1? So what – you can't say it often enough. Of course every DJ and DJane will develop their own style over time, and it is okay to favour certain music and reject requests by dancers that don't fit the overall concept. But: in the end, we need to get people to dance. If the dancers stay on their chairs or leave the dance floor abruptly, it is generally a bad thing, not usually a sign for them wanting desperately to listen to your wonderful tangos without being distracted by that pesky dance thing...

Finally a few words to all organizers and tango teachers: not everybody has the capacity to be responsible for the musical side of the milonga in addition to organizing or teaching. It is ideal if one person can concentrate on it. Nobody knows enough about tango music? Encourage your audience or your students to get engaged with the music. Maybe the beginners class will harbour the next DJ of your scene. Naturally, some dancing experience is helpful to develop a feel for the music, but the star dancer is not necessarily the best DJ.

And if you have succeeded in motivating someone: nurture this person, for it is the "heroes of the silver disc" who make your guests happy and content.

Many happy dances to the best tangos, milongas and valeses!

The article/author:

Melina Sedó wrote and published this article in the Tangodanza Magazine in April 2006. It was meant to be a guideline for aspiring Tango-DJ's and for communities without a fully developed DJ-culture.

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More information: [www.tangodesalon.de](http://www.tangodesalon.de)

More information on the internet:

For very curious people and pros: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/TangoDJ>

All about tango music & orchestras: <http://www.todotango.com>

Advice on building a CD collection:

<http://www.milonga.co.uk/tango/tangohome.html>

Tango lyrics: <http://argentina.informatik.uni-muenchen.de/tangos/index.html>