

Putting Canchengue on the Map

Geny Caloisi explains why canchengue is the essence of the tango now declared by UNESCO as part of the world's cultural heritage

UNESCO has declared tango music and dance "part of the world's cultural heritage". But there is, perhaps, a secret part of tango that has not been acknowledged. Argentines know that there are different types of tango. Show tango has bigger moves, more kicking and a less predictable use of the floor than you'd expect for exhibitions, salon tango has the subtlety of moves and consideration you'd expect when many people are on the dance floor at the same time and then there's canchengue – a type of tango it's quite difficult to appreciate without a bit of a background in Argentine history and culture.

At the tail end of a sunny day our traditional Milonguero (respected social tango dancer) is dressed traditionally for tango in a hat, suit, cravat and two-tone shoes. On arrival his first moves are to buy a glass of tinto (red wine) and scan the room to see whom he could ask for a dance. But this is tango and "ask" is a simplification, since a milonguero would not dare to risk losing face by going to a table, asking for a dance and being rejected.

Once at his table he makes eye contact with his desired partner. A tilt of the head lets the lady know she was receiving

an invitation and her response indicates acceptance or refusal. This very subtle process is called El Cabezaso, meaning signalling with the head. When successful it appears, to those who don't know what to look for, as if two people have ended up dancing together by magic, meeting on the dance floor as they make the tango embrace. His arm is firm across her back. She wraps her arm around his neck. Both bodies rest against each other at the chest, with some weight left between the two and the hips downwards to make the enchanted steps flow smoothly uttered. She closes her eyes and leads with small masterful

Trickier than canchengue, canchengue is a slightly different and the rhythm's different too. The ochos (eights), for instance are not a fluid movement of the legs drawing a figure of eight but a series of three steps that follow the beats of the music. The proximity of the partners allows for quick changes of direction and turns. The two bodies become one. Their walking is on the beat, with a slight oscillation from side to side. Step decorations are kept low and elegant. They say that a good canchengue dancer should be able to write

his or her name on the floor with the point of their shoes.

Canchengue can therefore be considered a synthesis of the essence of tango and it's about time it was put on the map. ●

Teacher Edith Maria Bernatene demonstrates canchengue at Maipu 444 in Buenos Aires. Photograph © Carole Edrich.

