

Art Flash

## Tango impressions with medical overtones

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Tango, and the milonga, are more than music or dance genres. They reflect a social phenomenon,<sup>1</sup> traditionally embracing emotions, everyday life, culture, poetry, satire, human concerns, and so on. The medical field, with its diverse domains, was no exception in providing a source of inspiration to tango composers.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the published scores of such compositions were consistently adorned with humorous artwork on their cover. Humor on the side, there were some serious medical matters that plagued Argentinian society at the turn of the twentieth century. Topics that recur in tangos are tuberculosis, syphilis, and mental illness. It appears that the human mind has an inherent ability to tackle the most serious problems in witty ways or, as Ramón y Cajal, the Spanish master of neurohistology, had theorized, when humans (and other vertebrates) abandon habitual seriousness and resort to play, mental life becomes integrated and full, and all cerebral systems get their turn in the game.<sup>3</sup>

This article presents a selection of “biomedical” tangos. One might be tempted to construct neologisms such as Tangoanatomy, Tangopathology, Tangopsychiatry, and Tangopharmacology.

Tuberculosis (*la plaga blanca*, “white plague” or “phthisis” or *la consunción*, “consumption”) is a recurrent theme in the tango; it was associated with poverty, poor working conditions of young women, and the perception of the disease by society.<sup>4</sup> Between 1870 and 1950, tuberculosis in cosmopolitan Buenos Aires was more than a frightening ailment; before the era of antibiotics, it caused anxiety, rooted in the fear of contagion and death, broader social concerns, government policies and the state’s intrusion into private lives. The resistance of tuberculosis sufferers to official attempts to control morality, sexuality, and daily habits became imprinted on literary works, on the daily and scientific press, song lyrics, cinema, and oral tradition.<sup>5</sup> Lyrics portrayed young ladies at downtown cabarets, and tuberculosis as a form of moral punishment and a predilection for women.<sup>6</sup> Two tangos associated with tuberculosis are “The bacillus” (*El bacilo*), tango-criollo for piano, composed by Alberico Spatola, dedicated to his friend Dr. José Infantozzi, and published in 1917 by Establecimiento Musical Beethoven-José Bonfiglioli; and “TBC” composed by Edgardo Donato in 1928 to lyrics by Víctor Soliño and Roberto Fontaina.

Syphilis, the “new” plague that had afflicted Europe in the early 1500s, secured its fast and world-wide distribution through war, commerce, and exploration. Treatment was empirical and erratic, developed over centuries by painful trial and error, using chemicals aimed to poison more the still unidentified causative agent and less the patient; it was based on the use of arsenicals, iodates, and mercuric compounds in abundance.<sup>7</sup> In Latin America, especially during the 1920s, specialists debated with foreign researchers on the origins, symptoms, and incidence of syphilis, attempting to rebut notions of backwardness and barbarism due to geography or racially mixed populations.<sup>8</sup> “Compound 606” (*El “606”*) — or arsphenamine, marketed under the trade name *Salvarsan*— was composed by Francisco Lomuto and dedicated to his friend Juan Rayos.<sup>9</sup>

Argentina around 1900 pioneered a neuropathological approach to psychiatry and a biological approach to psychology.<sup>10</sup> The patient was an ailing person, the insane or *aliéné* of the French School, who would be studied in view of a cure and the return to *citoyen* status. Such a trend was prompted by the positivist administrative organization of a fast-changing nation. Both the élite, inspired by liberal ideas derived principally from Europe and responsible for a record of

great economic and cultural development, and the conservative and nationalist leaders, who celebrated the rural and native cultural norms, had envisioned building the nation by implementing authoritarian traits and measures to establish and maintain social control through force. Both groups thus became concerned about immigration, mental illness, and political refugees, chiefly anarchists, as Argentina, by the beginning of the twentieth century, was undergoing a remarkable transformation, from an economically backward and unruly state to Latin America’s most advanced and wealthiest country. It is estimated<sup>11</sup> that between 1857 and 1916, over 4,750,000 immigrants entered a country that would in the years to come be marked by unstable society, oligarchy, conflict between rulers and immigrants, the resonance from the world financial crisis of 1890, the workers’ exploitation, abominable urban living conditions, increased crime around the Buenos Aires port, demonstrations, strikes, and a workers movement reaching the highest level in all of Latin America between by 1918.<sup>11-13</sup>



Figure 1. Musical scores of tangos on medical themes, from the private collection of the author, the Argentine Tango Society (todotango.com), and additional references mentioned in the text.

Psychiatric tangos include “Hysterical tango, somewhat rheumatic” (*Tango histérico, algo reumático*), composed by Miguel Tornquist, published in 1910 by Francisco Hirth, and dedicated to José Ingenieros (1877-1925);<sup>14</sup> “The psychopath” (*El frenopático*) by Osvaldo Pugliese, dedicated to his aunt Concepción Pugliese “as proof of affection”; “The looney” (*El loco*), composed by José María Férriz, and another *El loco*, composed by María Celina Piazza and dedicated to her father Romeo Piazza; “Madness” (*Locura*) by M. Guerama, lyrics by A. Caro; “Ballad for an insane” (*Balada para un loco*) by Astor Piazzolla, lyrics by Horacio Ferrer; and “Mad woman” (*Loca!*) by Manuel Jovés, lyrics of Antonio Viérgol, dedicated to “the sympathetic and intelligent” Luisa Salas.

Pharmacological-toxicological tangos are "The opium" (*El opio*) by Francisco Canaro, dedicated to his friend the Clerk and Public Accountant Manuel Couto;<sup>9</sup> "Cocaine" (*La cocaína*) composed by Juan Viladomat in 1926 to lyrics by Gerardo Alcázar;<sup>15</sup> "The dopeys" (*Los dopados*), tango-de-salón by Juan Carlos Cobián, dedicated to Julio de Caro and Pedro Maffia; "Artificial Paradise" (*Paraíso artificial*) by Rafael Tuegols; and "Matasano" (tango-milonga for piano) by Francisco Canaro, dedicated to the interns of Durand Hospital, published in 1914 by Juan Balerio, and referring to the white sapote tree, *Casimiroa edulis*, whose leaf and fruit infusion was known to Aztecs for the drowsiness it produced (owing to its content in histaminergic substances).

Anatomical tangos, obviously, include "The anatomist" (*El anatomista*) of Vicente Greco, dedicated to the interns of the Hospitals of the Capital on occasion of the 3rd Interns Ball of 1916,<sup>16</sup> and "Anatomy" (*Anatomía*) by Eduardo Arolas, dedicated to his distinguished friends, physicians Ricardo Rodríguez Villegas and Moisés Benchetrit, and published in 1920 by Breyer Hermanos.

Finally, tangos with themes from internal medicine are "Clinics" (*Clínicas*) by Alberto López Buchardo, dedicated to the residents of Hospital de Clínicas;<sup>17</sup> "The injection" (*La inyección*) and "Chloroform" (*Cloroformo*), tango-milongas composed by José Artusi and Udelino Toranzo, respectively, the latter dedicated to physician Rogelio Lahitte;<sup>18</sup> "The thermometer" (*El termómetro*) by José Martínez in 1917, dedicated to physicians Luis Galdeano, Amadeo Carelli and Antonio González; "Dengue fever" (*El Dengue*), tango-milonga by Miguel Alfieri; "The microbe" (*El microbio*) by Carlos Pibernat, tango-criollo dedicated to Dr. Luis Alvarez; "The purgative" (*Púrguese*) by Vicente de Cicco, dedicated to Dr. Nicolás Capizzano; and "The intern" (*El internado*), tango-milonga by Francisco Canaro, dedicated to Dr. Adolfo Rébora.

Select historic performances can be heard at the following sites:

*Matasano*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=93\\_n-72IaJo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=93_n-72IaJo)

*El opio*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWFkIfMYRgs>

*TBC*: <http://www.todotango.com/english/music/song/1859/TBC/>

*El termómetro*: <http://www.yourepeat.com/watch/?v=nebP64urgpQ>

*Clínicas*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UyIa0MJ88ds>

*La cocaína*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YGwY5GmXAK>

*Tango histórico*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzZO-l-sueU>

*El bacilo*: <http://www.free-scores.com/download-sheet-music.php?pdf=44646>

*Anatomía*: <http://www.free-scores.com/download-sheet-music.php?pdf=26575>

*El internado*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-GoagT7XaY>

*Los dopados*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tW6Uruy5GBI>

*Paraíso artificial*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTOEQenFQvo>

*Local!*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqbQUGFO4XA>

*Balada para un loco*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NbiqFo0w\\_JY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NbiqFo0w_JY)

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