

A note on notes

We have been (repeatedly, but not often) asked why we don't use regular notes and scores to describe the different musical phenomena like speeds or rhythms.

Here's why.

First of all: We are no musicians, a trait shared by most dancers. Although Detlef used to play the saxophone a bit, he rarely read scores, but mostly improvised or played by ear. Also, when we „grew“ up in Tango, there was almost no-one who taught music and musicality, so we had to figure out most of it on our own. Only much later we verified and extended our ideas and knowledge with the help of new written material or musicians. So what you get in our classes is **a system, developed by non-musicians, that is suited for dancers without the knowledge of musical notation**. Most people find this quite intuitive, which is why the bandoneonist Joaquin Amenabar (see Appendix 2) also bases his explanations on a similar approach.

In our system, we speak of beats in a measure and always count to 4. (If there are more than 4 notes in one measure, we just add „ands“ in between the numbers.) You can hear these four beats in the bass section of a tango. Grouping notes into measures makes music easier to read for musicians, but we also find that these groups make sense when listening to the melody. They subdivide the melody into small melodic units, mini-melodies, that have a beginning and an end. Often such a mini-melody is repeated several times, before another one is played. Sometimes, a measure also includes a melodic question by one instrument and an answer by another. This system of grouping 4 undefined beats (notes) in one unit (measure) and drawing a simple chart with X-es allows us to describe most relevant musical phenomena, including complex rhythms without having to care about the use of different forms of measures or the value (duration) of notes. It is very easy.

But practicability and our non-musical-upbringing are not the only reason, that we waive standard musical notation. Describing the musical phenomena with regular notes and scores in the context of teaching a *dance* might actually create problems, which I would like to point out here.

Problem 1: Determining the measure

Tango is not classical music. Beethoven composed a symphony as a complete work. He wrote down the notes for all instruments and if an orchestra will play his symphonies nowadays, they will usually stick to what Mr. Beethoven had written. To the last note.

Tango is a genre of popular music. Many original scores have been lost and the ones that are left, usually only show the main melody line and an accompanying instrument. When a specific Orchestra played or recorded a Tango, it had to either write an own detailed score (often done by an arranger) or play in an improvised manner. The notes that Rodolfo Biagi played on the piano in D'Arienzo's (and later in his own) orchestra were allegedly fully improvised. So, when playing a Tango, the orchestras did not only „invent“ new rhythmic variations, melody lines or accompanying instruments, they also used different measure systems. Most of their scores are lost or at least we don't have them. We just know that early Tangos were played in a 2/4 measure (the famous „dos por cuatro“), De Caro changed the notation to 4/4 and D'Arienzo used 4/8. So, writing down 8 consecutive notes with equal values (durations) would look differently, depending on which notation the orchestra used.

It could look like this:



Or like this:



Or like this:



„La Cumparsita“ e.g. exists in hundreds of versions. From all we know, the 1927 version by Canaro might have been notated in 2/4 measure, Di Sarli's version of 1955 in 4/4 and D'Arienzo's version from 1937 in 4/8. This is just a guess. The question remains: Which of these notations should we use in our explanations? Should this depend on the particular version of a tango that we are examining in a given moment? In any case, it would be quite difficult to make general statements.

But ok, let's make a generalisation and use the 4/4 measure to explain any musical phenomenon, although we know, that this notation does not apply to all tangos. This is when we encounter the next problem.

Problem 2: Determining the value of notes

By using our general system of numbers and Xes to mark on which beat we put our foot down (or arrive with the foot in its end position, see page 121) we avoid having to talk about two things, when introducing musicality: different note values and the dynamics of movements. We simply define in a general manner that the duration of a step is determined by the time that passes, before you do the next movement), assuming that the

centre of gravity moves continuously. A pause is thereby defined as a moment, in which your centre of gravity is not transported or pivoted. This easy to understand.

Advanced dancers might know, that we can change the mode of moving, our dynamics. We can either move by separating each element clearly from the next, which is appropriate for a staccato melody. Or we can move by linking one element to the other and moving fluently. This is not only more appropriate for more lyrical or elegant music, but also our „default“ walking mode in Tango. These different modes of moving would be encouraged by different ways of playing a melody and can be seen in the musical notation of Tango when you look at the duration of notes and use of pauses. (There is additional information given in the score, but let's not get into that.)

The normal speed could be based on the notation below. It uses quarter notes and a pause of one quarter note value after each note. This symbolises a staccato music. We would interpret it by using a more accentuated movement, separating one element from the other:



The normal speed could also be based on the next notation below. It uses half notes, the tones are held a little longer. This symbolises a legato music. We would interpret it by using a more fluent movement, linking each element to the next:



So, if we were to use the note values correctly and chose a standard musical notation, we would actually have to make more choices from the beginning, first how exactly to write it down and then whether to move fluently or more accentuatedly. In a way, that would be fine, because the manner of moving should depend on the type of music. La Cumparsita by Di Sarli might provoke the more fluent walk, the D'Arienzo version the more accentuated movement. Mind, we cannot know, how the orchestra arrangers wrote down the notes, but we might guess by listening to the tangos. In any case, this would open another field of questions. We will talk about these concepts in our next book+DVD. But we also find: In order to introduce musicality, we have to keep it rather simple. Listening to music on an intellectual basis is complex enough for every non-musician.

You might now understand better, why we hesitate to use standard notation in our classes and our book. But the musicians amongst you might still be happy about an additional layer of information.

So, let us say, we were to use a 4/4 measure and the „legato“ version of writing down the walking speeds and rhythms. (Mind, how we have to make a lot of assumptions and generalisations.) **This is how all the speed/rhythmic variations of our book would look like using standard notation:**

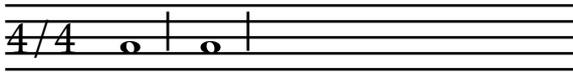
Normal speed:



Double Speed:



Half Speed:



Habanera:



134:



123:



234:



124



That's it for the moment. Thanks to Trud Antzée for confirming that the general musical principles and notations have been used in a correct way.

Melina Sedó