



Tango — Go, Stop

by Harold & Meredith Sears

When we dance our Smooth rhythms, like Waltz, Foxtrot, and even Quickstep, we are regularly encouraged to flow smoothly. We take one step and let it flow into the next so that there really is no line or marker where one step or action ends and the next begins. Our goal is to float, to swoop and soar, with no jerking — into one figure, out of that and into the next, in one continuous gliding movement. We might be skimming along like a flat stone skipping across the surface of a pond (Quickstep), soaring like an eagle on high (Foxtrot), or rising and falling like a bit of down on the breeze (Waltz). Our course might be faster or slower, higher or lower, but our goal is to move smoothly.

But not in Tango. International or English Tango is a flat dance with no regular rise and fall, and it is characterized by a staccato emphasis on each beat and alternating rests and actions. Take the step sharply and hold it, step and hold. In Tango, we dance many of the same pretty figures that we use in Waltz, but as one of our teachers often says, "In Tango, you take the *pretty* out."

In addition to making the steps sharp, there is no foot swivel. Put the foot where it should be, and then turn the body on that foot. Don't rotate the foot on the floor. The foot should hit the floor and stick. Tango is jerky — of course, not in an awkward way but in a dramatic and even haughty way. Don't smile. Don't even deign to look at your partner.

The hold is closer than in Waltz and the man perhaps more in control. Try this technique for getting yourselves into good tango closed position. First assume your usual closed or waltz position. Then swivel a little left face, soften the knees, and fit your four knees together like puzzle pieces. The rotation will shift the toes of your right foot to the instep of your left and make each of you just the slightest bit pigeon-toed. The man's right shoulder will lead. He steps forward on the outside of his left foot and rolls to the inside edge, onto the inside of his right foot and rolls to the outside edge. The steps are a little bit crab-wise and curved a little to the left. The right-side lead does this. Walk heel to toe, skimming the floor.

He places his right arm farther around the lady, and he brings his left hand closer,

bending the left elbow a bit more. She places her left arm on top of his right arm and tucks her left hand under his upper arm, even into his armpit, maybe palm down or palm in, fingers together, and thumb locked firmly under his arm. She must put herself well into his right arm — she is farther to his right and has stronger left sway than in other smooth rhythms. You are very close with her right hipbone tucked firmly into the pocket of his right hip. Glue yourselves together and dance as one, your trail feet stepping well between your partner's feet, but let left sway separate your toplines. Keep your torsos up and proud. Again, don't look at her.

Teachers tell us to walk "sticky." Place each foot and then stop; step and stop. There is much "stillness" in Tango. There is no flow, no flight, no swiveling on the balls of the feet. In the other smooth rhythms, the body is always in motion, in smooth and graceful arcs. In Tango, the body doesn't move past the foot. The foot and the body move together. When the foot stops the body stops.

Some Tango Figures —

Let's look at a few Tango figures and see how this stickiness, this lack of smooth prettiness, plays out. The **Walk Two** is danced in two slow counts, but we mustn't use the full slow to take the step. In closed position, the man steps forward firmly, resolutely (woman back). Get onto the lead foot and even bring the trail foot forward. Now hold. Your count might be to step on the 1, and fairly sharply bring the trail foot to the lead foot on the &-count. You see, you are really beginning to take your second walking step in the very first beat of this measure. Don't draw that trail foot up smoothly over the 1 and the 2, but place it sharply in a touch position. Now, hold beat 2. There is tension here, and drama. Now, repeat for the second Walk. Step with the trail foot, place the lead foot in readiness, and hold.

Instead of stepping, preparing for the next step, and then pausing, an option is to step, delay the movement of the non-supporting foot, and then quickly take that second step. The delay here actually forces the following step to be quicker, sharper, than it otherwise would be. It forces the look of action and stillness.

Foot placement contributes to the sharpness of the steps, too. We dance forward with the heel and then the flat of the foot, but with no rise and fall, there is no feel of rolling from heel to ball to toe in a fluid sort of flow. It is almost as if we are moving straight to the flat of the foot — Put it there! Put it there! — no flow; discrete steps. On the other hand, a Tango step is not like an Appel in Paso Doble. Rather than stepping "sharply," perhaps we should step "deliberately." Walk with right-shoulder lead (woman with left shoulder back). Progression will curve slightly to the left. There is a stealthy, stalking quality — step, listen for prey, step again.





The **Promenade** is little more than a Tango walk with a timing of slow, quick, quick, slow. In semi-closed position, step side and forward with the lead feet, step thru, step side and forward again, and then close right to left (woman left to right), the ball of the trail foot about even with the instep of the lead foot. Because our knees are flexed, a Tango closing step will leave the feet a little apart, and the knees will be together, the trail knee tucked behind the lead knee.

Especially on the slow counts, place the foot, get over that supporting foot, and then let there be stillness, but even on a quick, step deliberately. Instead of a quick, think of it as &/quick — step/hold. Get there. Don't flow. Don't glide.

The **Closed Promenade** also begins in semi-closed position. Step side and forward, thru, side and forward folding the woman to closed position, and then close the feet with no further turn, the trail foot a little behind the lead (woman's trail foot a little ahead). Make step 3 a little more of a side step than in a Promenade to semi-closed. The woman will have a little more freedom to fold to closed position. She will feel the snap more cleanly.

Although the woman folds from semi-closed to closed position — give her your right hip, men, to lead this — there is no turn for the man. Hip rotation is not body turn. The man's feet are still pointed toward line and wall at the end of the figure. So although we sometimes talk about "picking the woman up" on step 3, it is not a waltz pickup where she might step forward to line and then swivel left to face partner and reverse. She steps, does not swivel, and simply closes her head, facing about reverse and center.

In a **Double Closed Promenade**, we again begin in semi-closed and end in closed position, but we take two extra steps and briefly turn to closed position in the middle of the figure, as well as at the end (sqq; qqs;). Again, each "fold to closed" is subtle, a sharp but slight rotation of the woman's head and upper body to the left. Step side and forward left (woman right), thru, side and forward folding the woman to closed position, turn the woman back to semi-closed and step thru, side and forward folding the woman to closed position again, and finally close the trail feet. Step 3 needs to be danced more like a quick/&. She folds to closed position and steps side right and then quickly turns back to semi-closed position for step 4, thru left. Of course, the man needs to dance that &-count, too. He steps side left giving her his right hip and then takes his right hip away to turn her to semi-closed and then steps thru right. He will turn her to closed position a second time, so he is rotating his hips left on step 3, quickly right, and then left again on step 5.



How about a **Right Lunge**? In closed position, the man lowers into his left knee, steps side and forward right, flexes his right knee, and rotates a little to the left, all in one movement. In the other Smooth rhythms, our goal is to flow into each figure, through the figure, and back out and into the next. In Tango, our object is to put the woman sharply into the man's right arm. He can do that by stepping between her feet and actually pushing on the inside of her thigh with his right knee. He pushes with some abruptness (not enough to bruise, of course). His left-face rotation serves to throw her out there, and he should relax his

right elbow, allowing her to extend into his right hand. "Get out there!" Now, hold.

In Foxtrot, he will go with her into this lunge, maybe shift his gaze toward her — not enough get into her face or loom over her. He must always keep his topline up. But in Tango he should not go with her at all. He remains upright and even left and so creates a body line in opposition to hers. This opposition is part of the abrupt and haughty tension that is Tango.

Let's look at two types of Flick that often contribute to the staccato look of Tango. To do a **Head Flick**, we might be in semi-closed position. The man quickly rotates his hips right and then left to cause the woman to snap her head left and then right. There is no weight change. The man might be tempted to join in, to flick his head, too, but he probably should resist. Remember, his job is to display the woman, and in Tango, to control, to dominate, a headstrong partner. Of course, you must be in tight contact at the hips. It is no good attempting this at any decorous distance. Turn the hips sharply, &/quick, &/quick. Her head will go. She will not be able to resist.

It is always important for the woman to wait for the man's lead before dancing a figure. This is the difference between dancing with your partner and simply dancing in the vicinity of your partner. But here it is especially important to let the man "flick" the woman's head. If she passively allows herself to respond to his movement, it looks classy and is comfortable. If she flicks her own head, it can look quite odd, like a jerky nervous tic, and she will feel tense, too.

A **Foot Flick** can also be done in semi-closed position. The man does a tiny brush/tap — &/slow. In the process, he pushes with his left knee on the outside of her right knee, and she flicks her right foot back and replaces it to tap position. Again, there is no weight change.

As in the Head Flick, for this action to work, you must be in tight semi-closed position, with hips together and lead legs in contact. It is almost as if your lower body

is in closed position and only your upper body is in semi-closed. This is a good Tango semi-closed position at any time, but you mustn't get sloppy here. If you're in more of a half-open position and he bangs his knee into her leg from a distance, it won't feel good. The lead is just a slight nudge from a knee already touching. Again, the man does not flick his foot. There is no lead for the woman if he does. He can join in the flicks in some more light-hearted rhythm, maybe Mambo or Quickstep.

So, for a Head Flick, he nudges her with his left hip; for a Foot Flick, he nudges her with his left knee. Do both, and I suppose she would flick both. Be careful. We don't want to look like we're suffering some kind of seizure.

Do we have space for one more figure? The **Chase** is one in which we step forward slow, in semi-closed position. It's like the first step of a Promenade. But then we dance three quicks to banjo position facing reverse and wall, and finally recover quick staying in banjo. It is so tempting to smooth this figure into a sort of Foxtrot Curved Feather, but in Tango it needs to be sharp and angular. Step forward left (woman forward right). Make it sharp and bring the trail feet up and ready to begin the sequence of four quicks. Step through. Hold a moment. Side and turn sharply to closed position facing wall. At this point, you need to be in good Tango closed position with the woman well into the man's right arm, because his fourth step is

outside, turning sharply again to tight contra banjo position facing reverse and wall. Check it. Recover back in banjo quick and be ready for whatever exit might be cued — a side step to face reverse and center, a side chasse, or maybe a back/lock back. The important thing is not to curve steps 2, 3, and 4. We dance so many Foxtrots and Waltzes that it is easy to fall into the habit of smooth styling and flowing movements. It is tempting for the man to swing the left shoulder forward and into the turn. But Tango is sharp movements punctuated with static pauses. Here, step 3 is side, checking. Place the foot and hold in closed position. Place the body, man facing wall and woman facing partner. Don't swing the shoulder in a smooth, lingering arc. Step 4 involves a sharp right-face turn, checking again. In essence, the woman is wound up a bit to the left and then turned sharply to the right — bang, bang. Don't dance a smooth, graceful curve.

