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### The Jewish Influence on Tango

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Olivia Zalesin  
Pomona College

Reflective Essay

## Undergraduate Research Award Reflective Essay

“Jewish Tango.” Seems like an odd yet intriguing combination of words--does it not? That’s what I thought back in September as I sat in my dorm room brainstorming potential paper topics for my ID1 Seminar, “Tripping the Light Fantastic: A History of Social and Ballroom Dance.” Tango was an obvious choice to respond to a prompt, which read, “Write about any dance form you find interesting.” I’d been fascinated with the tango ever since I’d learned about the dance’s history in a high-school seminar on Modern Latin America and subsequently tried the dance myself in one of Buenos Aires’ famous dance halls. The Jewish element was, however, my attempt to add some personal element and to answer my own curiosity about a question that had been nagging at me ever since I heard my first tango music. Were the tango melodies I was hearing reminiscent of another music with which I was acquainted?

I am not a dancer, but rather a violinist who thoroughly enjoys exploring genres outside the mainstream realm. Among my favorite unusual genres is klezmer music, the traditional Jewish folk music of Eastern Europe. It’s unusual enough to be an eighteen-year-old klezmer musician, as klezmer is generally enjoyed by a very small number of older Jewish adults. Stranger is the idea that I’ve been playing klezmer for over ten years and that I continue to actively seek opportunities to refine my klezmer skills. One of the ways I’ve gone about this is by attending the Mark O’Connor Berklee College Summer String Program, a “fiddle camp” for musicians of all genres from classical, to klezmer, to tango.

Now let’s return to my dorm room brainstorming for a second. Tango’s history is extremely complex as it is, without any other elements complicating it. But I’m a student who doesn’t shy away from the complicated. I’m the student who thinks, “I heard some similarities between the music in my festival klezmer classes and my festival tango classes. I have no idea whether or not this relationship actually exists, so I should write a paper on it and see what I uncover.” And that is exactly what I did. My goal for the paper was simple: to understand, describe, and analyze the possible Jewish influence on the tango. But my route to reaching this goal was anything but. Resources were hard to come by and little did I know that what was

intended to be a four to five page paper would soon morph into a nineteen page historical and musical investigation. But like I said, it's no fun to shy away from the complicated.

As I began my research for this paper (still unsure that a Jewish influence on the tango even existed), an initial Google search led me to a film called "Tango, A Story with Jews," by Gabriel Pomeraniec. Obviously, it sounded extremely promising. I eagerly attempted to locate a copy, but was disappointed when the film was nowhere to be found. Neither was any contact information for the filmmaker. Desperate to get my hands on the movie, I did what any frantic teenager would do; I turned to Facebook and "friended" Mr. Pomeraniec himself, in hopes of acquiring my own personal copy. A few weeks passed and I heard nothing back, but finally a promising red notification appeared.

With the encouragement of my Professor, Anthony Shay, and the librarian assigned to my ID1 seminar, Alexandra Chappell, I spoke to Mr. Pomeraniec over Facebook messenger and attempted to negotiate a purchase of the film. Roadblock number one—the sale was cost prohibitive. Even when Ms. Chappell graciously agreed to email Mr. Pomeraniec herself, we found that obtaining the film remained impossible. Discouraged and without access to the only resource of which I was presently aware which certainly addressed my topic, I continued my research, eager to find another route.

After a little more digging, I learned that Mr. Pomeraniec's film was in fact based on a book by the Argentine author Jose Judkovski called, "Tango, Una Historia con Judios." I immediately thought that with a little help from the interlibrary loan system, all of my problems would be solved. The loan system worked seamlessly, but as was probably predictable, another barrier was up ahead. Roadblock number two—the book was available only in Spanish and I, of course, speak French. Luckily, my eight years of French education have left me surprisingly capable of reading other romance languages, so I parsed my way through the book the best I could (and admittedly turned to my Spanish-fluent Professor for some assistance). Together, we found that the book offered fascinating biographies of numerous Jewish tango artists along with a short historical account of Jewish immigration to Argentina. While the information in the book proved to be helpful, at least in validating that a Jewish influence on the tango was indeed present, I knew that I needed more information to round out my argument that the two genres are historically and musically tied.

Ultimately, I had to look no further than my own college. The Mudd-Honnold library offered resources above and beyond what I could have expected, especially given the specific nature of my topic. I gained much of my historical knowledge from Robert Weisbrot's, *The Jews of Argentina From the Inquisition to Peron*, and Judith Elkin's, *The Jews of Latin America*. After reading these more general sources, I was able to target my research to more pointed books such as Donna Guy's, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina*. While much of my musical analysis section relied on my own musical examination of tango and klezmer recordings found outside the library, the section was supplemented by information found in some of Mudd-Honnold's more unusual ethnomusicology books. I truly did not expect that I'd find enough materials to substantiate my thesis, let alone to fill up entire shelves of my dorm-room bookshelf with borrowed books.

Since initially completing my paper for my ID1 seminar, I have remained engaged with my topic and have actually continued to do research. Only recently, I located a few additional resources dealing with tangos written in Yiddish. These sources confirm my own historical findings but also offer new perspectives on the fusion of Jewish and Argentine culture. I intend to add a section to my paper in order to incorporate these new discoveries and acknowledge these resources.

As Ms. Chappell warned in my ID1 library workshop, the research process of combining resources from numerous disciplines was taxing and often frustrating, but entirely rewarding. And of course, I realize that I could not have completed the paper without the support and encouragement of Ms. Chappell and Professor Anthony Shay, and the extensive body of materials offered to me by Mudd-Honnold. As I go forward in college and am faced with new research challenges, I will do so with greater confidence and understanding of the research process and the many resources available to me as a Pomona student.

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Olivia Zalesin  
Pomona College

Research Project  
“The Jewish Influence on Tango”

## The Jewish Influence on Tango

By Olivia Jane Zalesin

After eleven years of private violin lessons, there is one session I remember most distinctly.

“I’ll play the piano part. You focus on the melody,” says my teacher. I sigh. I can’t tell which one of us is more tired of repeating this phrase. I pick up my violin reluctantly and start again. Down-bow, up-bow, trill, hold it hold it hold it...release. About four measures into the exercise, I stop and smile.

“The piano harmony sounds like a prayer. I’ve heard it in synagogue.”

My teacher looks up from the piano and stares at me. The aggravation on her face melts away as she contemplates my interjection.

“Mendelssohn came from a Jewish background,” she says. “Very good ear.”

For as long as I can remember, Jewish music has been ingrained in my head. I do not come from a particularly religious family, nor do I spend much time at synagogue analyzing cantorial chants. It may be that Jewish music is in my blood, but it’s more likely that my interest stems from my ten years of playing klezmer violin.

I expect that almost everyone reading this paper has just responded to the word “klezmer” with only vague recognition. A detailed analysis of the genre and its historical background will come later, but for now, I will simply describe klezmer as the collective musical story of a subjugated Eastern-European, Jewish population. It is, in its essence, the pain, the celebration, and the uncertainty of life expressed in the trills of clarinets and the sighs of the violin.

This Mendelssohn revelation is not at all out of character for me. In fact, I'd venture to say that I hear elements of Jewish music in most genres. There are, of course, genres with more obvious klezmer connections than others. For the past two years, I have studied at Mark O'Connor's Summer String Festival at the Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts, a "fiddle camp" that brings together violin masters of numerous genres. Yale Strom, a klezmer violinist and ethnomusicologist, and Federico Britos, a Uruguayan Grammy-winning tango artist, have been two of my most memorable teachers.

Before attending the Mark O'Connor festivals, I did not associate klezmer and tango in any way. After all, what might Eastern-European folk music and sensual Latin music have in common? It did not take more than a few tango classes for me to recognize that I was missing something important—an extremely clear yet subtle connection between klezmer music and the Argentine tango.

The relationship between tango and klezmer may initially seem to be a loose one at best, but my experience with both genres has led me to believe otherwise. The two genres are not only similar in their historical development; their musical nuances are undoubtedly linked. In listening to endless samples of tango music, my klezmer-trained ear has identified numerous overlaps that signify a clear cultural exchange between Latin American culture and Eastern-European Jewish culture. This paper will, in two parts -- historical development and musical analysis -- explore the fusion of music and culture in the period between 1890 and 1940, in an attempt to illuminate what I believe to be one of the richest yet most overlooked musical interactions in history.



### *Introduction*

My taxi pulls up to a black door and I step out into the deserted, dark alleyway. My senses are heightened; the light thumping of a bass catches my attention. I tug on the door-handle with all the strength I can muster. The door swings open and I am instantly enveloped by a waft of smoke and a shining red light.

Dancers glide gracefully across the dance floor, clinging to each other in a sensual, knowledgeable embrace. Legs kick but eyes do not meet. I move tentatively around the perimeter of the dance hall, inhale the smoke and the sex, take my seat, and settle in.

Tonight, this room is full of habituated couples—tango, a daily routine for twenty-somethings and older men and women alike. For the modern day Argentine, tango is an integral part of national identity. It is more than a dance form or background music; it is a way of life.

Stop. Rewind a century. In a dimly lit room similar to this one I have chosen to visit, the birth and evolution of the tango have begun. One hundred years ago, this room may have held a small orchestra of violins, cellos, a bass, and a *bandoneón*. In the center, a small dance floor. Thirty couples swirling in tandem, women led by their male counterparts.

The scene I describe is the common, classic tango scene. I wish to transplant the common with an image more complex. I wish to transplant the common with an image involving suffering immigrants, prostitution, and musical exchange. With history and music as my guides, I will navigate the inception of the multi-ethnic tango, keeping Jews at the forefront of my analysis.

### *Historical Development*

In order to fully explore the Jewish influence on tango, it is first necessary to answer three fundamental questions. What caused the mass emigration of Jews from Eastern Europe in the late 1800s to early 1900s? Why did so many of these Jews gravitate towards settlement in Argentina? And how did these Jews fit into the social and political realms of Argentine society? There is unfortunately little research regarding the Jewish relationship to tango, but history suggests that a cultural fusion between Eastern European Jews and the Argentine population is a viable possibility.

### *Expulsion*

The end of the nineteenth century marks a particularly dark period in Eastern European Jewish history. As poverty soared to all time-highs, lower-class citizens (many of whom were Jews) suffered both economically and emotionally. Emotions, however, were of little concern to Eastern European governments which sought to eliminate “economic upheaval and social and political struggle” (Elkin 54). “Economic healing” quickly became synonymous with “ethnic cleansing” as these governments introduced brutal *pogroms* to eliminate the “problematic” Jewish population. These *pogroms* were perhaps most severe in Russia where the May Laws (instituted in 1882) forced the confinement of Russian Jews to certain villages (Elkin 54).

Now lacking any semblance of home or belonging, displaced Jews began to flee over the Russian border to Germany where they were protected by Jewish relief organizations and smuggled out of Europe to the New World. Between 1880 and 1900, half a million Jews immigrated to the United States while thousands of others fled to countries in Latin America (Elkin 54-55).

*Attraction*

In August of 1889, the USS Wesser docked in the port of Buenos Aires, Argentina. On board the vessel were eight hundred and twenty-four Jews (Judkovski 15). Theoretically, Jews could have fled to anywhere in Latin America, but Argentina received more Jews than any other Latin American country. The explanation for this mass immigration is not obvious-- Argentina was difficult for immigrants to get to, the government did not offer free land, and a tumultuous past of religious intolerance deterred many potential settlers. So why the influx of Jews?

After gaining independence in 1816, Argentina struggled with population growth and development of trade, partially due to the fact that its native population lacked industrial skills. In an attempt to jumpstart the Argentine economy, politicians decided to market Argentina to white Europeans whom they thought would make the country more productive. Open immigration laws that stressed the “benefits of citizenship without the obligations” were soon enacted (Weisbrot 26).

Argentina was originally unsuccessful at enticing immigrants, but a dramatic change in leadership helped to remedy this situation. In 1854, Justo José de Urquiza came to power in Argentina by defeating the authoritarian ruler Juan Manuel de Rosas. Rosas was a classic example of a Latin American *caudillo*, or military ruler with a charismatic, “macho” personality. Although he succeeded in gaining a cult of personality, Rosas’ followers eventually withdrew their support when military control became too extreme. Urquiza’s government was far more appealing to many, including immigrants. It stressed more tolerance (political, social, and religious) and even enacted a constitution modeled after that of the United States (Weisbrot 28-29). For Jews seeking a safe haven from the pogroms, acceptance (not necessarily a community of other Jews), was of the utmost importance. Unknown Argentina lacked name-recognition, but

it served the necessary purpose of an escape and had the potential to become a true Jewish center.

### *Assimilation*

Unfortunately, Jews met a surprisingly difficult transition from life in Eastern Europe to life in Argentina. Upon their arrival in Argentina, the Jews did not fully integrate themselves into the bustling city of Buenos Aires but rather settled on the outskirts of town in the “arrabal” ghettos along with their fellow immigrants. The phenomenon is ironic. Jews who emigrated from Eastern Europe to escape the confining pogroms were once again segmented off from the rest of society.

In addition, Argentine media was quite adverse to the new wave of immigrants. *La Nación*, one of Argentina’s main newspapers, openly opposed the recruitment of Jews. The anti-Semitic novel, *La Bolsa*, by Julián Martel, similarly lamented the arrival of the new immigrants (Elkin 57).

Negative press could not, however, prevent Jewish immigration. By the time of the 1909 census, Argentina was home to “just under 50,000 Jews” (Elkin 58). By 1936, the Jewish population of Buenos Aires had skyrocketed to about 73,500. The majority of these Jews were Ashkenazim from Russia (referred to as *rusos*), accompanied by a healthy population of Sephardim from Spain, Portugal, Syria, and Lebanon (Weisbrot 71).

### *Livelihood*

A majority of these Jewish immigrants to Argentina held the status of proletariat workers. And, in contrast to their Italian and Spanish immigrant counterparts (who made up the majority of Argentina’s immigrants in the period between 1881 and 1932 (Azzi), Jewish immigrants as a whole possessed more industrial skills (Elkin 59). As Judith Elkin states, “the

fate of this Jewish proletariat would largely be a function of the capacity of the Argentine economy to absorb them into productive occupations” (Elkin 59). The business that absorbed them most rapidly was prostitution.

The development of prostitution in Buenos Aires between 1890 and 1920 is not at all surprising given the gender and socioeconomic composition of the city. As Donna Guy explains, “the excess of males in Buenos Aires made it an exceptional city in Argentina and explained its attractiveness to immigrant and creole females. Poor women might find work entertaining immigrant bachelors and native-born males who sought illicit sexual congress” (Guy 42). The development of the prostitution business in Buenos Aires was two-fold: Buenos Aires was teeming with young, single male immigrants willing to pay for sexual contact *and* equally poor women searching for lucrative jobs. The forces of supply and demand quickly shaped the prostitution market of the city.

The promise of financial gains attracted many marginalized people to prostitution, but Jews, perhaps the poorest of the poor, were drawn in most closely. By 1909, one hundred and two of the one hundred ninety-nine licensed brothels in Buenos Aires were run by Jews (Weisbrot 60).

Jewish involvement in prostitution did not go unnoticed. In fact, the phenomenon was so widely recognized that Argentine Jews as a whole gained a negative reputation. As punishment for their behavior, Jewish traffickers and prostitutes were banned from institutions like theaters and denied proper burials (Guy 19). Even the London-based Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women (JAPGW) made Buenos Aires and its human traffickers “its principal target(s) in South America” (Guy 17). Perhaps most interesting is the fact that Jews themselves spearheaded efforts to “keep men from pimping” in an attempt to avoid

embarrassment. Alas, these efforts actually “increased the visibility of Jewish prostitution” (Guy 19-20). As Donna Guy states, prostitution was “viewed as proof of the immorality of all Jews in Buenos Aires” (Guy 20).

Despite the social tensions that existed outside the bordellos between Jews, gentiles, and other ethnic communities, the groups peacefully interacted inside the brothels and prostitution remained an extremely lucrative business. In fact, Argentine gentile elites were among those who spent the most time in the bordellos. For the gentile sons of wealthy Argentine families, the bordellos provided a local exotic escape where religion and social class were forgotten. The mixture of characters in the brothels (a combination of Argentine elites and Jewish immigrants among others) sets the stage for an inevitable cultural fusion between Jewish music and culture and tango music and dance.

### *Musical Analysis*

#### *Birth of Klezmer*

Klezmer music developed in the impoverished Jewish “shtetls,” or ghettos, of Eastern Europe during the late 1800s to early 1900s. The music itself is extremely passionate and recognizable in its tonalities, rhythms, and cantorial-sounding cadences as it is meant to express the sorrows and joys of the common man. It is thus fitting that Klezmer was played at almost every event in the shtetls from weddings to funerals to the traditional circumcision or “bris.” In his treatise, *The Book of Klezmer*, ethnomusicologist Yale Strom writes, “it was said that a wedding without klezmer was worse than a funeral without tears” (Strom, xiv, Intro).

Klezmer music, while incredibly popular, was rarely transcribed (Sapoznik, 9, Klezmer!). Thus the extensive repertoire of improvised tunes was passed on aurally from generation to generation. As the etymology of the word “klezmer” would suggest--the word is actually derived from two words, “Kley” meaning “vessel” and “Zemer” meaning “song” (Sapoznik, x, Klezmer!)-- klezmer musicians or “klezmerim” were literally “vessels of song” who kept the klezmer tradition alive.

### *Birth of Tango*

Now if we return to our focus on Argentina, we can see that tango’s birth is similar to that of klezmer. Born in the streets of the arrabal ghettos of Buenos Aires and developed in the city’s brothels and dance halls in the late 1800s to early 1900s, tango (like klezmer) was the music and dance of the lower-class—a sensual genre that expressed the anguish of poverty within the context of a tense political climate (Collier). Originally, Argentinian elites rejected the tango because they considered it improper and almost barbaric in its suggestive movements. But the sons of such elites (the niños bien) actively sought this sensuality and learned the dance during visits to the brothels. When these elite young men made their way to Europe to complete their education, they introduced the tango to high European society members who “sanitized it,” or eliminated many of its evocative movements, to make it more acceptable. Ironically, the newly sanitized dance was then re-imported back to Buenos Aires where Argentine elites took up the dance as a high art form (Azzi).

### *Recordings and References*

Many believe that tango’s most prominent influence is that of African culture, and undoubtedly, an African musical impact (in rhythm most distinctly) is present. But given the large European immigrant presence in the arrabals, one might argue that the immigrant influence

is more visible. Nevertheless, this influence is not easily identifiable without an in-depth study of the musical figures of both klezmer and tango. In the following musical exploration of klezmer and tango, I will compare rhythms, harmonies, cadences, and ornamental figures common to the two genres. I will refer to two klezmer albums, *Klezmer for Everyone* and *Yikhes (Lineage)* (both collections of original source recordings), and various recordings of tango music from the late 1800s and early 1900s.

### *Rhythm*

According to Oxford Music Online, tango music tends to be written in 4/4 time and an extremely common tango rhythm is as follows: dotted eighth note, sixteenth note, followed by two eighth-notes (Béhague). This is the sensual rhythm associated with the *habanera* and the *milonga*, two Latin dances with great influence on tango. But in klezmer terms, this rhythm is the backbone of the *terkisher*, or a Romanian style, Turkish-influenced display piece at walking tempo (Strom 65). I reference *Yidisher Soldat in de Trenshes* and *Der Ziser Bulgar* off of the album *Klezmer for Everyone* as my *terkisher* examples (Klezmer For Everyone). The *terkisher* rhythm can be heard in Francisco Canaro's 1930s recording of *Milonga Criolla* (Canaro, *Milonga Criolla*) and in Carlos Gardel's recording of *Mi Noche Triste*, a sentimental tango with lyrics written by Pascual Contursi and music by Samuel Castriota (Gardel, *Mi Noche Triste*). The heavy *terkisher* rhythm combined with emotional lyrics lend Canaro's orchestral arrangement and Gardel's ballad their sensual and frustrated feel; the feelings of immigrants, both in the shtelts of Eastern Europe and in the arrabals of Buenos Aires.



### *Harmony*

Harmony-wise, the parallels between klezmer and tango are obvious. Oxford Music indicates that tango is commonly divided into three parts of equal length, the second part in the dominant or relative minor key of the first and the third often switching back to the major key of the first (Béhague). Similar tonal switching is extremely common in klezmer music. Klezmer pieces tend to consist of two to four distinct sections (referred to as Section A, Section B, and so on) and key changes to relative keys may occur between sections (Sapoznik, 297, *Klezmer!*). Take for example *Ruminisher Nign* performed by Naftule Brandwein on the *Yikhes-Lineage* album (Yikhes). We can hear a distinct sixteen-bar section of major tonalities followed by a shift to minor harmonies returning to a major cadence. On the same album, Brandwein's recording of *Naftule Shpilt Far Dem Rebn* is divided into distinct tonal units (Yikhes). Carlos Gardel's tango *Cuesta Abajo* was recorded around the same time as these two klezmer tunes (early 1900s) and exemplifies segmented tonal switching in Latin music. The tune begins in a minor key, detours briefly to major, and resolves in minor (Gardel, *Cuesta Abajo*). We can also hear distinct tonal switching in the Francisco Canaro Orchestra recording of the popular tango *Adios Muchachos*. In fact, the melody of this tune is at one point completely converted to a minor key (Canaro, *Adios Muchachos*). Given the number of immigrant musicians in Buenos Aires in the early 1900s (many of whom were Jewish), it is not at all surprising that harmonies from Eastern Europe might have worked their way into Argentinian tango music. And given that klezmer and tango often portray similar emotions, the use of similar harmonies to portray those emotions is entirely understandable.

### *Cadence*

My musical analysis of klezmer and tango has also led me to identify several common cadences in the two genres. Klezmer music is heavily influenced by the sounds of the human voice, particularly the specific melodies and tonal modes of Jewish cantors (Sapoznik, 9, Klezmer!). Thus it is very easy to identify certain cadences in klezmer akin to those of Jewish prayers or to those of “trop” (melodic markings) used for Torah readings (Strom 3). Listening to Carlos Gardel’s *Volver*, recorded in 1933, I recognize the first major harmonic swell following the first vocal line “*Yo adivino el parpadeo de las lucas que a lo lejos van marcando mi reotrno,*” as a common ascending modulation to a new tonic, used in cantorial Jewish music to establish a new phrase. In addition, Gardel’s phrase “*bajo el burlon, mirar de las estrellas que con indiferencie hoy me on volver*” resolves in a descending pattern back to the tonic, as do many of the prayers chanted by cantors in synagogue (Gardel, *Volver*).

### *Ornamentation*

Ornamentation in tango music is also most likely influenced by ornamentation of klezmer music. The most common klezmer ornamentation is the “khrekt,” or a cracking, moaning sound meant to mimic the raw intensity of cantorial chanting (Sapoznik, 9, Klezmer!). Trills and chromatic filler scales are also common, especially when instruments and vocalists trade-off verses. Across the board, tangos of the early 1900s are highly ornamented in order to portray intense emotion in already expressive ballads. Tango violinists in particular play with numerous embellishments, and as a klezmer violinist, I can identify almost all of these tango violin ornaments as klezmer ornaments. I attribute these similarities to an inevitable musical exchange between Jewish and gentile musicians in the brothels of Buenos Aires.

*Two Ages of Tango*

If we wish to delve deeper into the development of tango as a musical genre, we must distinguish between two distinct eras of tango: “La Guardia Vieja” and “La Guardia Nueva.” Tango scholars classify the period between 1890 and 1920 as “La Guardia Vieja,” or “the old era” (Judkovski). Within this early period, tango music was mostly devoid of lyrics, although some bawdy lyrics did exist. The focus was on instrumentation and musical development, and it is in this period that we see the important arrival of the large-button accordion, or *bandoneón*, on the tango scene.

The rapid musical evolution visible in the “La Guardia Vieja” can, from an ethnomusicological standpoint, be easily tied to an immigrant influence. In the brothels of Buenos Aires, tango orchestras were comprised of musicians from numerous ethnic backgrounds and faiths. Each musician, Jews included, would have contributed elements of his own culture and traditions. Jose Judkovski’s book, *Tango, Una Historia Con Judios*, lists numerous Jewish musicians who became prominent instrumental musicians as well as composers-- Arturo Bernstein, Luis Bernstein, and Alberto Teodoro Weisbach, just to name a few. As composers, these Jewish men were truly capable of leaving their mark on the Argentine tango.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment at which tango transitioned into “La Guardia Nueva” or “the new period,” but scholars generally agree that “La Guardia Nueva” began around 1920 and lasted into the 1930s (Judkovski). In this period, tango’s lyrics were romanticized and Argentina’s most famous tango singer, Carlos Gardel, gained prominence. Carlos Gardel was born in Toulouse, France in 1890 (although speculation surrounds his birth) and emigrated to Buenos Aires in 1893. In 1917, Gardel solidified his fame with a recording of Samuel *Castriota’s Mi Noche Triste*, a sentimental tango ballad, and went on to appear in numerous

tango films. After his death in a plane crash in 1935, Gardel is remembered as “a product of the arrabal...who came to symbolize the fulfillment of the dreams of the Argentine porteño” (Eisen). In contrast to the tangos of “La Guardia Vieja” that reflected the bawdy nature of a stagnant lower class, the tangos of “La Guardia Nueva” reflected a dream of upward mobility and glamour. Gardel and other tango singers of this period came to symbolize an idealized hope for Argentine society.

### *Two Ages of Klezmer*

Klezmer music, like tango music, experienced its own developmental “Guardia Vieja” and experimental “Guardia Nueva.” The “Guardia Vieja” of klezmer occurred prior to 1880 in the shtetls of Eastern Europe. Small bands featuring violins, clarinets, and the *tsimbl* (or hammered dulcimer) played klezmer as the soundtrack to daily life, celebrating the joyous occasions with dances called *freylekhs* and lamenting the sad with slow *doinas* for reflection (Sapoznik, Oxford Music). Other Eastern European dances like the polka and mazurka (which ultimately influenced tango’s dance steps) can also be categorized under the broader umbrella of klezmer.

One might have anticipated a total disappearance of klezmer post-emigration of Jews from Eastern Europe. The genre did indeed decline in popularity for a short time, but it defied the odds and experienced a revival at the turn of the twentieth century. This revival took place primarily in New York City, though the effects emanated quickly around the rest of the world (Sapoznik, Oxford Music).

Clarinetists Naftule Brandwein and Dave Tarras were two of the most influential klezmer musicians to come out of this revival. While neither Brandwein nor Tarras gained popularity in the United States akin to that of Carlos Gardel in Argentina, they certainly drew attention to the

klezmer scene with their theatrical stunts. Most notable is the theatricality of Brandwein who once performed dressed in an Uncle Sam costume, wrapped in Christmas lights. His performance ended in near electrocution due to profuse perspiration (Harris).

While it is rarely the case that individual musicians are responsible for the formation of a musical tradition, Brandwein and Tarras can undoubtedly be credited with the creation of modern klezmer. As is appropriate, revival klezmer bands of today attempt to build upon the legacies of Brandwein and Tarras by playing playful and complex arrangements of klezmer tunes composed in the early 1800's. Classic examples of revival bands include *The Klezmer Conservatory Band* and my own klezmer band. More experimental revival bands include *The Klezmatics*, *The Klez Dispensers*, *Flying Bulgar*, and *Margot Leverett and the Klezmer Mountain Boys*.

I draw attention to the two ages of klezmer music and the two ages of tango to prevent a possible misunderstanding. My musical analysis draws from both eras of both genres, and I am fully aware of the potential implications of analyzing "originals" versus more stylized recordings. I do not wish to conflate the two eras of tango or the two eras of klezmer, although there is not much risk given the similarities between the old and new eras of both genres. The essence of tango's "Guardia Vieja" exists in the "Guardia Nueva," and the same phenomenon can be recognized in old-world versus new-world, New York klezmer. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, I combine my tangos and my klezmers.

#### *Music and Dance*

In furthering the spirit of full disclosure, I admit that I must now introduce a concept that I cannot fully explain. Enter (finally) tango, the dance. If the goal of my research were to provide a visual image of tango the dance, I would now discuss the concept of leading and

following and interpret the importance of each movement (although many books such as Marta Savigliano's *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* would provide much more artful and detailed descriptions). My research, however, strives to illuminate the presence of immigrant influence, and I admit that I struggle with how to argue the presence of Judaism in tango the dance.

Dance ethnographers generally recognize the influence of fast-paced, partnered, Eastern European dances like the *polka* and the *mazurka* (which were often danced by Jews at weddings and other celebratory occasions) on the tango. But scholars often forget the influence of more traditional Jewish dances. Let's look for a moment at the *hora* and the tango. A *hora* can be visually identified by a sequence of cross-step motions (right foot over left foot, then left over right), first in one direction, followed by a repetition in the other. Likewise, a tango can be characterized by sequences of these same tight crossover motions (Azzi). While it is fairly unlikely that customers in the brothels of Argentina would have ever seen a *hora* in its entirety, it is not impossible that elements of *hora* footwork worked their way onto the dance floor and into the tango. Of course, any footwork analysis is speculative at best. And while I do not believe that tango footwork is necessarily "Jewish" in its essence, it is certainly interesting to note the similarities in choreography. Despite the inconclusive nature of *dance* analysis, I retain my faith in the audible *musical* connection between klezmer and tango.

## ***Conclusion***

### *Implications of Musical Fusion*

The concept of musical fusion is certainly not a new concept. In fact, I anticipate the questions: Why is the musical fusion of tango and klezmer unique? Why is the musical fusion of

tango and klezmer important? What makes the tango and klezmer fusion unique is not the blending of rhythms, harmonies, and ornamentations. Rather, it is the idea that klezmer influenced tango during the heart of tango's most rapid evolution. The timing is purely coincidental, but the implications are striking. Had Jews and other immigrants arrived in Argentina at the end of tango's "Guardia Nueva," their influence might have been limited to lyric-writing and instrumental performances. But given their arrival at the beginning of the "Guardia Nueva," immigrants influenced more than a few outwardly obvious musical elements--they influenced the tango's soul.

While identifying musical "feeling" is certainly subjective, the emotional link between tango and klezmer is fairly obvious--both genres express plight associated with poverty, politics, and personal relationships. In an absence of Jews and klezmer music, it is entirely possible that tango might still have evolved into the sentimental genre it is today. Argentina's history certainly provides much inspiration for lamenting music. Nonetheless, immigrant groups with their own painful stories *must* be credited for their contributions to the grief and angst central to tango.

### *Research*

In her book *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*, dance ethnographer Marta Savigliano states that she has been "struck by the very existence and magnitude of the controversy over the origins of tango" (Savigliano 159). I cannot help but chuckle at this quote, not because I find difficult research comedic, but because I can truly relate to this sentiment. After months of conducting my own tango research, I feel practically lost in a sea of ethnographical works. I have read books that paint portraits of gender inequality, lament Argentine political strife, and bring to life tango's sensual choreography. However, none of

these works seem to provide the key piece of information I seek: a specific time or location to mark the birth of the tango. Perhaps my expectations are too high given that I am studying a genre of music and dance. Improvisation, motion, and uncertainty are already deeply embedded in my topic.

Frustrating as this may be, an inability to pinpoint an origin of the tango allows for the exciting addition of many new analyses like my own. While a number of authors have briefly noted that a Jewish influence on tango is present and plausible, I am aware of only a few academic sources focused entirely on the Jewish influence on tango: José Judkovski's book *Tango, Una Historia Con Judios* a movie by Gabriel Pomeraniec (based on Judkovski's book), and Julio Nudler's book, *Tango Judio: del ghetto a la milonga*. Additionally, I have yet to find any academic sources that take my approach and compare the musical nuances of tango and klezmer.

A research project somewhat related to my own is that of singer Lloica Czackis, who studies and performs what she has dubbed the "Yiddish Tango" in her ongoing project, *Tangele*. While my research focuses on the Jewish influence on tango at its inception in Buenos Aires (which Czackis recognizes and discusses in more general terms), Czackis primarily focuses on the transportation of the tango to Europe during the early 1900s and the Jewish adoption of this tango during the 1930s and 1940s. Still, Czackis and I come to two similar conclusions. First, the Jewish interaction with tango is not at all surprising given that the angst central to tango resonated with Jews living in poverty in Buenos Aires, with Jews in the shtetls of Eastern Europe, and later with Jews living their final days in Nazi concentration camps. Second, we find that the Jewish interaction with tango is prominent, yet only one piece of the whole story of tango. As Czackis eloquently writes, "Yiddish tangos are only an episode in this chronicle, an



example of the Jews' tendency to adapt to the ethos of their adoptive countries and also, more generally, the mutual acceptance and fruitful interaction between peoples" (Czackis).

*Continuing Discoveries*

Though many of the similarities I have found between tango and klezmer lie in subtleties of chord changes and cadences of little interest to the average music consumer, these subtleties may tell us more about Jewish and Latin interactions than any history book or immigration chart. It is within these subtleties that we hear the joys and sorrows of immigrants and begin to understand the importance of the music they left behind. Unfortunately, my research is not conclusive, but rather a small piece of an extraordinarily complex puzzle and a project that I hope to continue in years to come. My analysis of tango and klezmer may not spur a sudden widespread interest in Latin and Jewish musical interactions, but I do hope that this analysis draws attention to an extremely rich yet under-recognized cultural exchange.

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