Tango, Emotion, and Transculturality in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

Yuiko Asaba (SOAS University of London)

Its accent is the song of a sentimental voice,
its rhythm is the beat that lives in my city,
it does not pretend,
it does not disrespect,
it is called tango and nothing more.[1]

"Una emoción" ("An Emotion")
Music by Raúl Kaplún. Lyrics by José María Suñé

Many contemporary Japanese tango musicians believe the ability to convey emotions is key to a "good" Argentine tango music performance.[2] They frequently draw upon their life experiences to convey Argentine tango's powerful, and sometimes painful, emotions, fabricating discourses surrounding tango's authenticity in Japan. In over six years of my recent fieldwork in Japan,[3] many musicians and singers emphasised to me how life experience and feelings are interwoven. They believe that life feeds into such powerful feelings, and that

[1] "*Su acento es la canción de voz sentimental, su ritmo es el compás que vive en mi ciudad, no tiene pretensión, no quiere ser procaz, se llama tango y nada más.*" All translations in this chapter, from both Spanish and Japanese, are my own unless otherwise stated.

[2] In this chapter, I use the phrase "Argentine tango" to refer to Argentine tango repertory performed by Argentine and Japanese tango musicians and singers.

[3] I have conducted fieldwork in Japan during 2013–2016, 2019–2020, and remotely since March 2020. In Argentina, I have undertaken various fieldwork research: in 2004, during 2005–2008, followed by short fieldwork trips in 2010 and 2011.

empathy, meaning sympathy for all-encompassing human conditions, constitutes a key characteristic of a good tango musician. Empathy is often translated into Japanese as *kyōkan* (共感), literally "to feel" (感) "together" (共). Here, empathy becomes not only about a shared understanding (*kyōkan*) of all human conditions, but one that transcends the boundaries of the self and the other, embracing the past, present and future, as well as the public and private. Such discourse around how one performs emotions through Argentine tango has become rooted in Japanese tango musicians through the channeling of cultural, moral, and historic symbols that are familiar in Japanese contexts.[4]

The construction of Argentina's national identity through tango and references to emotion date back to Argentina's modernisation at the turn of the twentieth century.[5] A sense of nostalgia for the "pre-modern" past and for a bygone era, as well as issues of suffering and joy of everyday life, became the central topics in shaping one key facet of Argentina's identity through tango. In this process of creating a distinctive identity of the Argentine population, tango powerfully evoked and aestheticized another key emotional dimension—Argentina's sense of longing as a land of immigrants for a distant homeland between the late nineteenth and early twenty century.[6] Kacey Link and Kristin Wendland highlight tango's "musical lament" in their discussion of how the twentieth-century *tango canción* (tango song) captured the essence of tango's *tristeza* (sadness).[7] Through the *tango canción*, the words and one's ability to convey the feeling of the lyrics—imbued with life's suffering, happiness, or what is

[4] Yuiko Asaba, " 'Folds of the Heart': Performing life experience, emotion and empathy in Japanese tango music culture," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 28, no. 1 (2019): 45-65.

[5] This was certainly no simple construction of national identity, but one that involved "the Buenos Aires-centered nationalists" who celebrated and manipulated "the tango of the brothels and tenements." Marta E. Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1995), 165.

[6] Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*.

[7] Kacey Link and Kristin Wendland, *Tracing Tangueros: Argentine Tango Instrumental Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 11-14 and 33.

understood as life's reality—became considered crucial in a good tango performance by Argentine musicians as well as fans, and central to tango's vocal performance practice.[8]

Against this historical backdrop of the 1920s and 1930s, Matthew Karush points to Buenos Aires popular cultural trends that embraced melodrama, and describes emotions invoked in tango music as the "aesthetic of emotional excess."[9] Furthermore, Julie Taylor discusses tango's melodrama and the idea that emotions conveyed in tango reflect people's "everyday" feelings.[10] In this discussion about the performances of the "everyday," it is crucial to note that what is "framed as 'reality' or 'the everyday,'" needs to be understand under the realist discourse, and what is claimed as "everyday" is "itself an aesthetic construction."[11] Similarly, psychologist Gerald C. Cupchik referred to the ways in which "everyday" feelings are imparted in the arts and performance as "the aesthetics of lived experiences."[12] Indeed, when we tell our life stories, we do not necessarily tell everything that happens to us every day, but instead choose *what* and *how* to tell our stories, and in *what* contexts. Thus, in certain respects, how we feel, remember, and tell what we think we remember and feel, are already aestheticized.[13] To unpack how this entangled dynamic of performance and emotion is central to the aesthetics of tango, I turn to the notion of the "aesthetics of emotion",[14] or "how emotion is ordered, given meaning, performed and ascribed beauty and value."[15] The concept concerns

---

[8] In Japan, this concern for conveying emotion through tango's vocal performance was cultivated during the post-war years. On the study of tango performance and the importance of lyrics through the examination of the celebrated Japanese tango singer Abo Ikuo (1937-2021), see Asaba, " 'Folds of the Heart' ." This article also discusses the theme of Argentina-Japan intimacy through tango performance.

[9] Matthew B. Karush, *Culture of Class: Radio and Cinema in the Making of a Divided Argentina, 1920-1946* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 85-132.

[10] Julie M. Taylor, *Paper Tangos* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1998), 19.

[11] James Butterworth, "Andean Divas: Emotion, Ethics and Intimate Spectacle in Peruvian Huayno Music." (PhD diss., Royal Holloway, University of London, 2014), 131.

[12] Gerald C. Cupchik, *The Aesthetics of Emotion: Up the Down Staircase of the Mind-Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 9-11.

[13] On emotion as aesthetics in the study of the relation between mind and body, see Cupchik 2016.

[14] Butterwoth, "Andean Divas." Cupchik, *The Aesthetics of Emotion*.

[15] Butterwoth, "Andean Divas," 36.

itself with how people relate to the expressions of a particular genre's aesthetics, and to the "aesthetics of lived experiences"[14]—the *idea* that what is being expressed represents and resonates with our everyday feelings.

In this chapter, thus, I build on these discourses and narrow my focus to the specific concern of the aesthetics of tango, showing how musicians and scholars relate themselves to the aesthetics of emotion through performance and narratives. I examine how they discuss tango performance in relation to emotion, regardless of their background, socio-economic status, and personal circumstances.[15] I further examine how this discourse around aesthetics, in turn, aids in one's understanding of the way tango performance imparts emotion. To clarify the obvious, I do not claim that tango intrinsically has feelings, nor do I examine each listener's emotional responses to a particular tango performance. This study is about the ways in which the discourse surrounding emotion and tango performance has been historically and culturally cultivated to refer to a "good" tango performance.[16]

Through historical and ethnographic approaches applied to my research and fieldwork in Argentina and Japan, I examine the cultivation of narratives surrounding the portrayal of emotion through tango performance in the transcultural contexts of modernity.[17] In this chapter,

---

[14] Cupchik, *The Aesthetics of Emotion*, 1-15.

[15] On the cultural history of class and tango in Japan, see Yuiko Asaba, "Demarcating status: tango music and dance in Japan, 1913-1940," in *Worlds of Social Dancing: Dance floor encounters and the global rise of couple dancing, c. 1910-40*, eds., Klaus Nathaus and James Nott (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022), 154-176.

[16] Realist aesthetics and an ability to convey powerful emotion being considered a key to a good performance, are indeed not limited to tango. For further reading, see: Butterworth, "Andean Divas"; Lila Ellen Gray, *Fado Resounding: Affective Politics and Urban Life* (Durham: NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Aaron A. Fox, "The Jukebox of History: Narratives of Loss and Desire in the Discourse of Country Music," *Popular Music* 11, no.1 (1992): 53-72; Heather Willoughby, "The Sound of Han: P'ansori, Timbre and a Korean Ethos of Pain and Suffering," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 32 (2000): 17-30.

[17] I use "modernity" in this chapter to refer to specific historical periods in which becoming modern were considered important in Japan, including between the 1910s and 1930s, and the years immediately after World War II between the latter half of the 1940s and 1950s. Aspects of modernity and the attitudes of aspiring to be modern in Japan are considered to have been the ethos during the pre-war and the immediate years following the war. See, for example, Harry D. Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press,

I use the adjectives "transcultural" and "transnational" to refer to the cultural and national crossings and transformations that are involved in Japanese musicians performing Argentine tango music.[18] I also discuss how contemporary tango music pedagogy incorporates the same aesthetics. I do not argue for the unique emotionality evoked through tango performance, nor do I essentialize Argentine and Japanese discourses of emotions and tango. On the contrary, the ways in which such narratives were historically cultivated, illuminate a Japan-Argentina connection through the aesthetics of emotion that has been influenced significantly by—and equally greatly impacted—wider, global loops of mobilizing self-transformations through music.[19]

The chapter begins by illuminating the ways in which tango has been associated with nostalgia and, often, with painful emotions in Japan. Tango's renewed uses in Japanese popular song genres after World War II evoked an immense sense of nostalgia for the years before the war, revealing the devastating destructions caused by the war. In this context, and in the restored embrace of modernity in post-war Japan, the narratives surrounding associating Argentine tango and emotion were established in Japan. The chapter then moves on to its final investigation on the contemporary approaches to imparting emotions in tango performance in the transcultural contexts, by looking at the pedagogical language for conveying emotion through tango performance in Argentina and Japan.

Argentine Tango, Emotion and Transculturality

From the Early to Mid-Twentieth Century

2000).

[18] Aihwa Ong has argued that "Trans denotes moving through space or across lines, as well as the changing nature of something." Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 4.

[19] For further discussion see Asaba, " 'Folds of the Heart'." The ideas of "cross currents" and "feedback loops" to refer to the global circulation of cultures, are inspired by David Novak, *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

> When I was in the first year of junior high school, I found out that I was an adopted child, and that my birthmother had recently passed away. I felt so incredibly sad…absolutely devasted...Then, the sounds of Argentine tango poured out of the radio. The tone of the violin felt so melancholic, and the bandoneón's rhythm resonated like a heartbeat.[20]

Sugawara Youichi (b. 1933), a hugely successful Japanese popular singer, began his career as a tango singer in 1958 with the Orquesta Típica Tokio, led by the bandoneonist Hayakawa Shimpei (1914–1984). During our telephone interview, he described how the sounds of Argentine tango resonated with the pain he felt as a child, illuminating the depth of his sorrow through the medium of tango. Sugawara then told me how these powerful emotions mobilized his ambition to enter the music industry.

Argentine tango has been internationally popular since the start of the twentieth century. In Finland, their love-affair with tango (since the 1930s) is now affectionately called Finland's "National Music."[21] Many pioneering developments in tango, such as jazz-tango fusions and tango music used in films, took place in the United States even though many tango devotees have considered that only tango from Argentina holds authentic value.[22] Argentine composers who immigrated to France have found artistic freedom to explore new forms of tango, making Paris one of the most vibrant *tanguero* cities in the world today.[23]

In Japan, tango was introduced from the Euro-American social dance circles as a modern practice during the country's modernisation in the 1910s, attracting curiosities and interests from across the Japanese society. Despite tango's initial introduction via Europe and North America, however, Japanese musicians and dance aficionados turned to Argentina in

---

[20] Sugawara Youichi, fieldwork telephone interview by Yuiko Asaba. Oxford, United Kingdom-Tokyo, Japan, April 19, 2021. All Japanese names in this chapter take the conventional order of names in Japan, which is surname first, unless their publications appear in the English order of names.

[21] Yrjö Heinonen, "Globalisation, Hybridisation, and the Finnishness of the Finnish Tango," *Etnomusikologian vuosikirja* 28 (2016):1-36.

[22] Dorcinda Celiena Knauth, "Discourses of Authenticity in the Argentine Tango Community of Pittsburgh" (Masters diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2005).

[23] Caroline Pearsall, "Tango in Diaspora—An Argentine Abroad: An Examination of the Parisian Tango Music Community" (Masters diss., Royal Holloway University of London, 2011).

search of tango's "authenticity" in the late 1920s.[24] In Japan today, Argentine tango is widely performed in Western art concert venues, tango *milonga* (tango dance) parties, and expensive bars and restaurants that are dedicated only to offering tango music played by live bands every night. In fact, live Argentine tango shows are featured in a recently opened restaurant named Pampa Mía in Tokyo, established in 2021. Tango is popular among the younger generations of Japanese people as seen, for instance, by the thriving tango orchestra Orquesta de Tango Waseda at Waseda University in Tokyo, a student-led professional tango orchestra that performs in major concert venues and at dinner shows.

Throughout the history of Argentine tango in Japan, Japanese tango music aficionados and musicians have cultivated a discourse surrounding tango's associated aesthetics of emotion. These narratives of tango and emotion became further established in Japan in the years immediately after the end of World War II, a time when embracing the idea of modernity again became the crucial ethos to rebuild the shattered country after its defeat. Various Argentine tango music associations that were founded across Japan at this time nurtured the narratives surrounding tango and emotion through discussions in the wide-spread publications on Argentine tango in popular presses, and via the Argentine tango music radio programs that were established during this era.[25] In this popular discourse, being able to covey a powerful emotion came to be considered a key factor in a good tango performance. These narratives surrounding tango and emotion in post-war Japan also nostalgically looked back to before World War II when tango was popular in Japan in the 1930s. In the 1930s, the well-known

---

[24] Yuiko Asaba, "The Reception of Tango and the Creation of its Authenticity in Twentieth Century Japan: A Study from the Perspective of "Internalized Modernity"." (「20 世紀日本におけるタンゴの需要と「本場」意識の形成—内面化されたモダニティという視点からの一考察」) *Popular Music Studies* (『ポピュラー音楽研究』) 24 (2020): 3-15. The English translations of the titles of Japanese and Spanish works have been undertaken by the author unless otherwise stated. Where the English title appears in the publication, the title written in the language of the original publication has also been included.

[25] Asaba, "The Reception of Tango."

Argentine tangos "La Cumparsita" and "Poema" became huge hits among the Japanese public. As we will see below, the two tango songs were to be recorded as part of a popular Japanese tango song after the war,[26] reminiscing the pre-war era that had not yet experienced the utter destructions of World War II.

The outbreak of World War II led to the closure of dancehalls and prohibition of popular entertainments, including ballroom dancing and other genres imported from the United States such as jazz, due to the political climate at this time. However, tango, which was considered distinct from "the music of the enemy countries" by the Japanese military—continued to "warm Japanese people's hearts" in private settings even during the war.[27] This familiarity with tango, being rooted in Japanese people's everyday lives before and during the war, became a key incentive for the tango boom—the "Golden Era of tango" in Japan—that followed the war from the late 1940s to early 1970s. Even members of the next generation that did not directly experience the war became tango fans as a result of the familiarity they acquired with the genre when their parents and siblings listened to it when they were children. Indeed, as this generation moved to adulthood, tango created a deep nostalgia as it brought back memories of their families. Accordingly, Japan's "Golden Era" of tango not only refers to its boom after the war, but also to the era when tango represented comfort and hope at a time of political turbulence and tremendous threat to Japanese lives.

---

[26] This popularity led composers of the Japanese popular song genre called *kayōkyoku* to use tango extensively, and to create the so-called Japanese tango. In this chapter, I use the phrase "Japanese tango" to refer to a repertory that was composed by Japanese popular music composers in the *ryūkōka* (popular song) genre in pre-war Japan, and in the broader Japanese popular music genre, *kayōkyoku*, through to the latter half of the twentieth century. Japanese tango repertory that was composed as part of these two genres used lyrics in Japanese, often evoking Japanese and Chinese "traditional" melodies as well as utilizing melodies and rhythms that invoked genres such as jazz and tango. On Japanese tango, see Toshio Azami, *Tango and the Japanese* (*Tango to nihonjin*) (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 2018), 177-99.

[27] Hayato Tajima, "Modern Japan's Melodramatic Imagination and 'Crossing of Borders': Discourse Analysis of Argentine Tango" ("Modan Nihon no merodrama teki sōzōryoku to 'ekkyō': Aruzenchin/tango wo meguru gensetsu bunseki"), *Bigaku Geijutsugaku Kenkyū* 27 (2009): 157-60.

Following the war in 1952, a hugely popular Japanese singer, Kasaki Shizuko (1914–1985), recorded the song "Tango Monogatari" ("Tango Story"), with the lyrics and music written by Hattori Ryōichi (1907–1993), one of the most influential *kayōkyoku* composers. In "Tango Monogatari," the melodies echoed the much-loved "La Cumparsita" and "Poema," and the words reminisce nostalgically about "Poema": the very song that had been recorded in Japanese by the acclaimed Japanese singer, Awaya Noriko (1907–1999) before the war broke out. This potent sense of nostalgia was undoubtedly motivated by the immense destruction caused by the intervening war, but it also reflected how Argentine tango had become a deeply familiar sound for Japanese people.

Amidst this post-war Japan's renewed "tango boom," Japanese tango music aficionados and musicians continued to cultivate a discourse around tango's associated aesthetics of emotion. Significantly, these ideas about tango's aesthetics of emotion were nurtured against the historical background of embracing tango as a "middle-brow culture," or a "middle culture" (中間文化) by the influential Japanese sociologist Katō Hidetoshi. In his 1957 essay "Chūkan Bunkaron" (中間文化論, or "A Study of the Middle Culture"),[28] Katō contributes *chūkan bunka* (middle culture) to the idea of "an infinite vertical scale" of comparing the arts between the "high-brow," "middle-brow," "low-brow"—terms coined in the United States and Britain in relation to modernism.[29] Building on these notions of measuring the arts, Hidetoshi's

[28] See Katō Hidetoshi, *Chūkan Bunkaron* (*A Study of the Middle Culture*), in *Katō Hidetoshi Chosakushū 6* (Collection of Essays by Katō Hidetoshi Vol. 6), ed. Katō Hidetoshi (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1957/ 1980), 259-98.
Chūkan Bunkaron (A Study of the Middle Culture) (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1957/1980) and Reo Nagasaki, *"Tsunagari" no sengo nihon-shi: Rō-on, soshite Takarazuka, Banpaku* (Cultural History of Post-War Japan, the 'Cultural Connectivity': From Rō-on, to Takarazuka, Banpaku) (Tokyo: Kawade Shuppan, 2013).

[29] Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 3. The recent rise on the studies of music and the middlebrow, following such turns in film and literature studies, have seen many publications on this theme by musicologists, among others, working on music in the twentieth century. For further reading see: Christopher Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism: Britten's Operas and the Great Divide* (California: University of California Press, 2018); Kate Guthrie, *Music and Middlebrow Culture*

chūkan bunka identified post-war Japan to be socially divided between the "high-brow dominant," "low-brow dominant," and "middle-brow dominant" cultures.[30] According to him, *chūkan bunka* referred specifically to the post-war mid-1950s cultural trends in Japan that entailed a type of culture that was "not particularly high-class, while also not vulgar"—a type of culture that "satisfie[d] certain intellectual pride."[31] From this perspective, he argued, the middle culture was a "compromising culture that is intermediary, going in between the high culture (*kōkyū bunka*) and the popular culture (*taishū bunka*)."[32] In this "middle culture" hierarchical space, he listed such music genres as musicals, and what he called "semi-classical music" such as tango, jazz, and "mood music." He argued that, although these genres were not as "refined" as Western art music, the possibility of playing them in a more "refined" Western art-music formation at a classical music venue afforded them with a closer to the "high-art" status.[33]

In this scale of measuring cultures, Western art music represented the "high culture," which people without a university education in post-war Japan may approach to gain cultural refinement. The "low culture sphere" was occupied by Japanese popular songs, which often

---

in Modern Britain (California: University of California Press, 2019); John Howland, *Between the Muses and the Masses: Symphonic Jazz, "Glorified" Entertainment, and the Rise of the American Musical Middlebrow, 1920-1944* (California: Stanford University Press, 2002); Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

[30] Katō Hidetohi wrote: "[i]n my opinion, post-war Japan has already passed the two processes [of embracing both "high" and "low" cultures], and is now in its third process. So what are the three processes. Hypothetically, I consider that the three [socio-cultural processes] can be identified as one that is centered around high-culture (High-brow dominant), around popular culture (Low-brow dominant), and around middle culture (Middle-brow dominant). In other words, it is now the era of middle culture." Katō, *Chūkan Bunkaron*, 259. I hereby include Hidetohi Katō's original words: "私の考えでは、戦後の日本文化はすでに二つの段階を経過して、いまや第三期にはいってきている。その三つの段階とは何か。私はこれを假に高級文化中心の段階（High-brow dominant）、大衆文化中心の段階（Low-brow dominant）および中間文化中心の段階（Middle-brow dominant）として区別ができるように思う。つまり、現代は中間文化の時代である。" Katō [加藤], *Chūkan Bunkaron*, 259.

[31] Katō, *Chūkan Bunkaron*, 269.

[32] *Ibid.*

[33] *Ibid.*

reflected Japanese lives on the street, including the struggles of post-war prostitutes and people's poverty. From this perspective of evaluating tango as the "middle culture," the genre came to be both embraced and rejected, precisely due to it being outside the "high culture"[34]; Western art-music listeners and Western art musicians in Japan, for instance, often described emotion conveyed in tango as "overly melodramatic." In many respects, thus, while associated with the Euro-American modernity, tango's aesthetics of emotion that expresses melancholy, together with tango's hint of risqué exoticism,[35] and the fact that tango represented a popular culture, embodied a certain feel of the "middle culture" in post-war Japan. It attracted and at the same time alienated listeners who aspired to belong to the "high culture"—a dynamic of embracing and rejecting that continues even to this day.

The demarcation of cultures in post-war Japan gave rise to a debate about tango and emotion among Japanese tango musicians and Japanese tango music aficionados. In this discourse, each musician's emotion came to be considered key to a good tango performance. In certain respects, portraying powerful emotion through tango became a musical protest against the cultural hierarchies and "refined," "high art". Indeed, the Japanese embrace of Argentine tango's aesthetics of emotion was also undoubtedly influenced by the deep-rooted tango's aesthetics of emotion in Argentina. As we have seen, the importance of conveying everyday joy and suffering shaped a key ethos surrounding the aesthetics of emotion

[34] Musicologist Christopher Chowrimootoo has described what he termed the "middlebrow modernism" as an aesthetic space in twentieth century Western art music world, that "allow[ed] contemporary audiences to have their modernist cake and eat it: to revel in the pleasures of tonality, melody, sentimentality, melodrama, and spectacle, even while enjoying the prestige that comes from rejecting them." Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism*, 3. Tango's emotionality, characterized as melodramatic whilst forming part of an important genre aesthetic, contributes to this idea of tango's emotion as both "rejoiced and rejected" in the vertical cultural hierarchy: rejoiced as an outward-looking genre by Japanese tango performers and aficionados, while its emotional expressions rejected by some Western art music listeners and musicians in Japan due to its deep-seated characterization as being outside the "high art." In many respects, the idea of the "middle culture" demonstrates the possibilities and, above all, limits of measuring cultures.

[35] See Florencia Garramuño, *Primitive Modernities: Tango, Samba, and Nation*, translated by Anna Kazumi Stahl (California: Stanford University Press, 2011).

concerning tango performance in twentieth-century Argentina. Through Japanese tango musicians' and aficionados' search for the authenticity of Argentine tango music in the post-war years, discourses of performing emotion through tango became widely disseminated via teaching, reflecting such trends in Argentina's tango worlds as we will examine below.

[Illustration 1 and text]

Conveying Emotion through Tango in Contemporary Argentina and Japan: Discourses and Pedagogy

In the worlds of tango music in contemporary Argentina, the deep-seated aesthetics of performing powerful emotion through tango continues to be transmitted through discourses and pedagogical approaches. As discussed above, the aesthetics of emotion surrounding tango music performance in Argentina is believed to be created in part via its expression of "everyday life"[36] and, in some, a shared sense of "bad luck [in life]" that is perceived to have "universal implications".[37] Furthermore, in my interview with acclaimed Argentine tango critic Nélida Rouchetto, she emphasized life's uncertainty and suffering as crucial part of contemporary tango's aesthetic:

> ...tango musicians [in Buenos Aires] started to use the word *barro* (mud) around the 1960s to describe the quality of tango performance, metaphorically... The mud here refers to that of *conventillo* [tenement houses] of Buenos Aires, where many immigrants and lower-class workers lived in the early twentieth century. *Barro* symbolized the unpaved roads of *conventillos*... you know? These roads of *conventillos* that were covered with thick mud, mixed with the hardworking people's sweat and blood of suffering...[38]

Here, the idea of "mud" fabricates the narrative surrounding tango's authenticity in contemporary contexts. Describing tango's aesthetics of suffering, Julie Taylor writes of Buenos Aires and tango after *la guerra sucia* (the Dirty War)—the war in Argentina initiated by the military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983—as having come to "express...the particular

---

[36] Taylor, *Paper Tangos*, 19.
[37] *Ibid.*, 4.
[38] Nélida Rouchetto, interview with Yuiko Asaba. Buenos Aires, Argentina, June 23, 2006.

forms of disorientation, loss and uncertainty of the nation's fate inculcated by years of terror."[39] Indeed, the immense devastation experienced by many in Argentina after the 2001 financial catastrophe continues to shape the narratives surrounding the nation's suffering, and so in turn tango's aesthetics of emotion in contemporary Argentina.[40]

Such narratives of suffering that derive from recent Argentine history have simultaneously characterized the diverse approaches to imparting "lived emotions" through tango performance today.[41] The contested notion of *mugre* (dirt or grit), a noun mentioned to me several times during my fieldwork in Argentina and Japan in relation to conveying "lived emotions," [42] illuminates one significant example of the way through which tango performers approach performing emotion via tango in contemporary contexts. *Mugre* also refers to life's hardships and reality.[43] The Spanish word *suciedad* has been suggested as its synonym,[44] and filth as its English equivalent.[45] In reference to the "wider cultural context" of tango's *mugre,* Jessica Quiñones writes:

---

[39] Taylor, *Paper Tangos*, 19.

[40] See Morgan James Luker, *The Tango Machine: Musical Culture in the Age of Expediency* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

[41] My use of the idea and practice of imparting a "lived emotion" derives from Christine Yano's study on Japanese enka performers. Enka's emotion in singing, considered key in a good enka performance, is portrayed by practising what Yano has referred to as Japanese "kata." Kata is a set of fixed movements in the Japanese traditional performing arts, and here it points to vocal techniques as well as to body movements that carry particular emotional meanings. Christine R. Yano, *Tears of Longing: Nostalgia and the Nation in Japanese Popular Song* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 24.

[42] "Contested," because many Argentine tango musicians prefer not to use the term *mugre* to refer to a tango performance. See below.

[43] Yuiko Asaba, "The Notion of *Mugre* in Argentine Tango Violin Performance" (Conference paper, National Graduate Conference for Ethnomusicology, University of Cambridge, 2006), 1. In writing about concepts of uncleanness, Mary Douglas referred to "dirt" as "disorder" that "offends against order". See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London & New York: Routledge, 1966), 2. In many respects, Argentine tango's aesthetics of *mugre* (dirt) represents a critique of society and "ordered" Western art music.

[44] Ramón Pelinski, "Astor Piazzolla: Entre Tango y Fuga, en Busca de una Identidad Estilística," (Astor Piazzolla: Between Tango and Fugue, In Search for A Stylistic Identity) in *Estudios sobre la Obra de Astor Piazzolla* (Studies on the Work of Astor Piazzolla), ed. Omar García Brunelli (Buenos Aires: Gourment Musical Ediciones, 2008), 50.

[45] Maria Susana Azzi, "The Tango, Peronism, and Astor Piazzolla During the 1940s and '50s," in *From Tejano to Tango: Latin American Popular Music*, ed. Walter A. Clark (London: Routledge, 2002), 38. The aesthetic of "dirt" as a positive quality in a good performance is not unique to tango. For

> ...metaphors for *mugre* are shaped by the landscape of the tango experience, and are used to tell stories of everyday *porteño* [a person from the port city of Buenos Aires] life in a collective and shared manner. The images portrayed in various descriptions of *mugre* were contextualized through wider tango themes, such as destitution, social marginalization, class-struggles, the lover, disillusionment...[46]

Such historical and personal narratives surrounding people's suffering in Argentina's recent history have been superimposed on tango's aesthetics of emotion, further deepening the ways in which performers approach conveying "lived emotions" through tango. For instance, violinist Fernando Suárez Paz (1941–2020), former member of Astor Piazzolla's Quinteto Tango Nuevo, described *mugre* to me as the essence that is not written in music, and how it draws upon each musician's emotions and life-experience.[47] In this interview, Suárez Paz seemed to argue against the idea that *mugre* can *just* be created, and how, though there is something ineffable and unpredictable about it, one knows when they hear it. He seemed to oppose the idea that there is a kind of recipe for producing it.[48] Instead of claiming it as something that can be learned through technique, he seemed to imply that it is about the "sentiment of each musician," and is built on experience and knowledge.[49] Rather than

---

example, David Hughes notes that in Japanese traditional folk song an "earthy (*tsuchikusai*)... [and] somewhat rough-edged voice quality" is considered a key quality in good folk song performance. See David W. Hughes, *Traditional Folk Song in Modern Japan: Sources, Sentiment and Society* (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2008), 197. Similarly, Frederick Moehn observes that the aesthetics of "dirtiness", "mess" and "swing" are important to Brazilian carnival samba performance. See Frederick Moehn, *Contemporary Carioca: Technologies of Mixing in a Brazilian Music Scene* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012), 98-111.

[46] Jessica Quiñones, "Constructing the Aesthetic: Approaching the '6 Tango-Etudes Pour Flûte Seule' by Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992) for Interpretation and Performance." (PhD diss., University of Huddersfield, 2013), 87.

[47] "In music, it [*mugre*] is the sound that is not necessarily considered beautiful...It is also not necessarily the correct sound or way of performing... It is the *rubato*, the *portato*...and the *glissando*. It is hard to describe and it is unclear (*algo que no está claro*) and not written (*algo que no está escrito*), and it is the *sentimiento* (feeling) of each musician." Fernando Suárez Paz, interview with Yuiko Asaba, Buenos Aires, Argentina, May 24, 2006.

[48] "Well, it is better not to be tied to the word *mugre* when playing tango. It is the feeling of listening to a piece of music [tango] and thinking "wow this passage [of music] is really nice". Why, because it has "*mugre*", rather than other way round..." *Ibid.*

[49] For in-depth discussions on the ways in which "each musician's feelings" are perceived to become interwoven with Argentine tango's aesthetics of emotion, see Asaba, " 'Folds of the Heart' ."

thinking of *mugre* as the immediate cause of the tango aesthetic, Suárez Paz stressed each musician's "feeling" imparted in a tango interpretation as the essence of a good performance.[50] Moreover, according to many Argentine and Japanese tango musicians the *mugre* rhythmic feel—or the "swing"—is believed to be honed through performing on stage: as such, experience gained from performing with other tango musicians constitutes an important part of learning to convey emotion through tango. [Illustration 2 and text]

Nonetheless, the use of the word *mugre* in reference to tango performance is relatively new, as Rouchetto described to me:

> …[in the 1960s] when talking about tango performance, *barro* was used instead of *mugre* you see...but from around the 1980s onwards some musicians began to use *mugre.*[51]

Rouchetto's comments regarding the recent introduction of the *mugre* concept are supported by Argentine bandoneonist Carlos Pazo, who, while expressing his dislike for the word *mugre* in relation to tango, explained that it only began to be used from the late twentieth century by musicians.[52] (Carlos Pazo, interview, Buenos Aires 11 June 2006).

---

[50] Suárez Paz, interview. According to Suárez Paz, *mugre* also refers to the rhythmic feel as seen, for instance, in the double bass execution of tango rhythm: "... it [the double bass] is equally significant as the left hand [bass] of the piano. For instance, a classical double bassist plays the *marcato* like this [demonstrates on the violin playing in *détaché*], but really, it needs this [demonstrates on the violin with *arrastre* (the drag)]. This drag (*levare*) is very important, because this drag has to arrive exactly on the first beat of the next bar and thus the drag needs to start (*atacar*) just before the first beat [of the bar]. But there are musicians who mistakenly say "you are playing the first beat too early" and "that is not written on the score". I would say, of course it is not written. That is the trap, and the essence of tango." Suárez Paz, interview. *Mugre* is also used to refer to tango's swing, as well as to sound effects uniquely used in tango instrumental performance. See Asaba, "The Notion of *Mugre*." Indeed, there is a sense of the aesthetic described by Charles Keil as a participatory discrepancy, where the swing in jazz performance is shaped precisely by a certain musical discrepancy between performers. Charles Keil, "Participatory Discrepancy and the Power of Music," *Cultural Anthropology* 2, no. 3 (August 1987): 275-283.

[51] Nélida Rouchetto, interview with Yuiko Asaba, Buenos Aires, Argentina, June 23, 2006.

[52] Carlos Pazo, interview with Yuiko Asaba, Buenos Aires, Argentina, June 11, 2006. Pazo, however, insisted that *mugre* does not represent "true tango." Playing Aníbal Troilo's recording during my interview, he protested passionately, "how can the sounds of Troilo be *mugre* (dirty)? How can his sound be described as 'dirty'? It is beautiful!". Carlos Pazo, interview. Indeed, gatekeeping the "right" or "wrong" feelings in performance always needs to be understood in relation to a particular historical ethos. See Martin Stokes, *Republic of Love: Cultural Intimacy in Turkish Popular Music* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 188-193.

Similarly in Japan, the word *mugre* began to be used from the late 2000s onwards, when more and more Japanese performers began travelling to Buenos Aires to study tango or to polish their existing skills as tango musicians. By then, some of the Argentine musicians had started to use the word *mugre* when teaching tango performance to foreigners—even though the term was not favored by many Argentine musicians when associated with tango—as a pedagogical reference to transmit the knowledge of tango aesthetics. In this pedagogical context, *mugre*'s metaphorical meanings that refer to life's hard work and life experiences became superimposed on the urban aesthetics of tango.

In Japan's tango worlds today, this aesthetic contrasts with modern technology that enables achieving goals too easily, also made possible by the moderate wealth of today's middle-class Japanese society. As such, for many tango musicians in the older generation in Japan, the metropolitan context of contemporary Japan lacks the hardships they endured in the era of post-war destruction, which they view as key to tango's aesthetics of emotion. Here, *mugre* is indeed used in reference to economic hardship, suggesting a sense of moral value necessary to achieve a good tango performance. According to a number of Japanese tango musicians whom I interviewed, the *mugre* of tango is achieved by learning on stage at dance hall venues as a way of undergoing *tataki age* (forging) training—a term derived from the Japanese word *tataku* (to strike) and originally referred to how a blacksmith forges an iron into shape in Japan. Accordingly, *tataki age* is a phrase used for disciplining and training in craftsmanship as well as in the worlds of the arts.[53] For the musician, it refers to how one trains their skills into shape, and it is generally understood that with drilling and hard work they gain not only music's technical knowledge but the emotional depths surrounding hard work, thus feeding into the artistic outputs.

---

[53] See Dorinne K. Kondo, *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

In Japan today, where dance halls are no longer the venues for experiencing tango, the ways of imparting life-experience through tango are acquired through such pedagogical means. Through narratives and pedagogies, tango's emotions continue to take shape in performance in transcultural and transnational contexts, transcending the beauty of musical structure to powerfully convey "each musician's feelings" that resonates with each listeners' life experiences.[54]

Conclusion

This essay has argued that Argentine tango's aesthetics of emotion were nurtured in the transnational contexts of modernisation, modernity, the histories of national catastrophe and their devastating aftermaths. Propelled by the need to establish a national music genre that powerfully drew from the sentiments of the "pre-modern" past in Argentina, and in resonance with the wider, global circulations of debates surrounding musical "middlebrow" in post-war Japan, tango's emotionality reveals the transnational histories of celebrating and denying emotion against the backdrop of measuring cultures, while establishing particular aesthetics and ways of performing emotion through tango transculturally in the contemporary worlds.

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 846143.

List of Interviews:

Abo, Ikuo. Intetview by Yuiko Asaba. Tokyo, Japan. July 23, 2014.
Asaba, Rica. Interview by Yuiko Asaba. Kyoto, Japan. July 11, 2014.
Monna, Toshio. Interview by Yuiko Asaba. Kyoto, Japan. March 9, 2011.
Pazo, Carlos. Interview by Yuiko Asaba. Buenos Aires, Argentina. June 11, 2006

[54] Evoking sympathy of a listener has been argued as an important quality in the aesthetics of emotion and sentiments in a performance that powerfully invoke "imaginations of the sentimental subject". Stokes, *Republic of Love*, 63. A performer's "sincerity" is also seen to form an important part of popular music's aesthetics of emotion. Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 197.

Rouchetto, Nélida. Interview by Yuiko Asaba. Buenos Aires, Argentina. June 23 2006.
Suárez Paz, Fernando. Interview by Yuiko Asaba. Buenos Aires, Argentina. May 24 2006
Sugawara, Youichi: Interview by Yuiko Asaba (telephone). Oxford, United Kingdom-Tokyo, Japan, April 19 2021.

Bibliography

Asaba, Yuiko. "The Notion of *Mugre* in Argentine Tango Violin Performance." Conference paper, National Graduate Conference for Ethnomusicology, University of Cambridge, 2006.

Asaba, Yuiko. " 'Folds of the Heart': Performing life experience, emotion and empathy in Japanese tango music culture." *Ethnomusicology Forum* 28, no. 1 (2019): 45-65.

Asaba, Yuiko. "The Reception of Tango and the Creation of its Authenticity in Twentieth Century Japan: A Study from the Perspective of "Internalized Modernity"." (「20 世紀日本におけるタンゴの需要と「本場」意識の形成—内面化されたモダニティという視点からの一考察」) *Popular Music Studies* (『ポピュラー音楽研究』) 24 (2020): 3-15.

Asaba, Yuiko. "Demarcating status: tango music and dance in Japan, 1913-1940." In *Worlds of Social Dancing: Dance floor encounters and the global rise of couple dancing, c. 1910-40*, edited by Klaus Nathaus and James Nott, 154-76. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022.

Azami, Toshio. *Tango and the Japanese* (タンゴと日本人). Tokyo: Shūeisha, 2018.

Azzi, Maria Susana. "The Tango, Peronism, and Astor Piazzolla During the 1940s and '50s." In *From Tejano to Tango: Latin American Popular Music*, edited by Walter A. Clark, 25-40. London: Routledge, 2002.

Bigenho, Michelle. *Intimate Distance: Andean Music in Japan*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012.

Butterworth, James. "Andean Divas: Emotion, Ethics and Intimate Spectacle in Peruvian Huayno Music." PhD diss., Royal Holloway, University of London, 2014.

Chowrimootoo, Christopher. *Middlebrow Modernism: Britten's Operas and the Great Divide.* California: University of California Press, 2018.

Cupchik, Gerald C. *The Aesthetics of Emotion: Up the Down Staircase of the Mind-Body.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo.* London & New York: Routledge, 1966.

Fox, Aaron A. "The Jukebox of History: Narratives of Loss and Desire in the Discourse of Country Music." *Popular Music* 11, no.1 (1992): 53-72.

Frith, Simon. *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music.* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.

Garramuño, Florencia. *Primitive Modernities: Tango, Samba, and Nation*, translated by Anna Kazumi Stahl. California: Stanford University Press, 2011.

Gray, Lila Ellen. *Fado Resounding: Affective Politics and Urban Life.* Durham: NC: Duke University Press, 2013.

Guthrie, Kate. *Music and Middlebrow Culture in Modern Britain.* California: University of California Press, 2019.

Harootunian, Harry D. *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Heinonen, Yrjö. "Globalisation, Hybridisation, and the Finnishness of the Finnish Tango." *Etnomusikologian vuosikirja* 28 (2016):1-36.

Howland, John. *Between the Muses and the Masses: Symphonic Jazz, "Glorified" Entertainment, and the Rise of the American Musical Middlebrow, 1920-1944.* California: Stanford University Press, 2002.

Hughes, David W. *Traditional Folk Song in Modern Japan: Sources, Sentiment and Society*. Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2008.

Karush, Matthew B. *Culture of Class: Radio and Cinema in the Making of a Divided Argentina, 1920-1946.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.

Katō, Hidetoshi. *Chūkan Bunkaron* (*A Study of the Middle Culture*). In *Katō Hidetoshi Chosakushū 6* (Collection of Essays by Katō Hidetoshi Vol. 6), edited by Katō Hidetoshi, 259-98. Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1957/ 1980.

Keil, Charles. "Participatory Discrepancy and the Power of Music." *Cultural Anthropology* 2, no. 3 (August 1987): 275-283.

Knauth, Dorcinda Celiena. "Discourses of Authenticity in the Argentine Tango Community of Pittsburgh." Masters diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2005.

Kondo, Dorinne K. *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace.* Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Levine, Lawrence W. *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1988.

Link, Kacey and Kristin Wendland. *Tracing Tangueros: Argentine Tango Instrumental Music.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Luker, Morgan James. *The Tango Machine: Musical Culture in the Age of Expediency*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Moehn, Frederick. *Contemporary Carioca: Technologies of Mixing in a Brazilian Music Scene*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012.

Nagasaki, Reo. *"Tsunagari" no sengo nihon-shi: Rō-on, soshite Takarazuka, Banpaku* (Cultural History of Post-War Japan, the 'Cultural Connectivity': From Rō-on, to Takarazuka, Banpaku). Tokyo: Kawade Shuppan, 2013.

Novak, David. *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.

Ong, Aihwa. 1999. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality.* Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.

Palomino, Pablo. *The Invention of Latin American Music: A Transnational History.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Pearsall, Caroline. "Tango in Diaspora—An Argentine Abroad: An Examination of the Parisian Tango Music Community." Masters diss., Royal Holloway, University of London, 2011.

Pelinski, Ramón. "Astor Piazzolla: Entre Tango y Fuga, en Busca de una Identidad Estilística" (Astor Piazzolla: Between Tango and Fugue, In Search for A Stylistic Identity). In *Estudios sobre la Obra de Astor Piazzolla* (Studies on the Work of Astor Piazzolla), edited by Omar García Brunelli, 35-56. Buenos Aires: Gourment Musical Ediciones, 2008.

Quiñones, Jessica. "Constructing the Aesthetic: Approaching the '6 Tango-Etudes Pour Flûte Seule' by Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992) for Interpretation and Performance." PhD diss., University of Huddersfield, 2013.

Rubin, Joan Shelley. *The Making of Middlebrow Culture.* North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1992.

Savigliano, Marta E. *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*. Colorado: Westview Press, 1995.

Stokes, Martin. *Republic of Love: Cultural Intimacy in Turkish Popular Music*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Hayato Tajima, "Modern Japan's Melodramatic Imagination and 'Crossing of Borders': Discourse Analysis of Argentine Tango" ("Modan nihon no merodrama teki sōzōryoku to 'ekkyō': Aruzenchin/tango wo meguru gensetsu bunseki"), *Bigaku Geijutsugaku Kenkyū* 27 (2009), 157-205. The University of Tokyo.

Taylor, Julie, *Paper Tangos.* Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1998.

Tucker, Hazel. "Empathy and Tourism: Limits and Possibilities." *Annals of Tourism Research*

57 (2016): 31-43.

Wajima, Yūsuke. “Are we the “world”? Whose children are we? Gobalisation, self-orientalism and world music in Japan.” *Dialogue & Universalism* 13, no. 11/12 (2003): 103-112.

Willoughby, Heather. “The Sound of Han: P’ansori, Timbre and a Korean Ethos of Pain and Suffering.” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 32 (2000): 17-30.

Yano, Christine R. *Tears of Longing: Nostalgia and the Nation in Japanese Popular Song*. Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2002.

Audio links