THE STEP

In tango, there is one thing, the step. There are three kinds of step: Walks, Ochos and Molinete’s (or grapevines).

1. Walks

Start walking. Say it: Right, Left. Right. Left. In tango, the simplest thing is the hardest thing. When I am on two feet, I am at rest. When I am on one foot, I am dancing. When you step, wait, don’t bring your feet together, that belongs to the next step. You are skating on one foot, this is where you glide. Now, step. Bring your feet together and reach – all in one motion. When the feet pass, they kiss, they touch. Reach the foot, point the toe, aim, go a little farther. Travel. Do it again. Gather. Reach. Go. Wait! Don’t close your legs! That belongs to the next step. Then, again, all in one motion: gather-reach-step. Keep going: Gather-reach-step. Again. Say it: Gather-reach-step. Gather-reach-step. Practice landing on the beat. Walking backwards is harder. Point the heel where you want to go and reach and land on the toe. Wait! The gather belongs to the next step. Then, again. Gather. reach, step.

2. Ochos, or Eights

The ocho is a folded step, a step with an added pivot. Your are dancing figure-eights. Now you go gather-pivot-reach-step, in one continuous motion. Gather-pivot-reach-step. Don’t stall in the pivot, carry the energy all the way to the next step. The leg travels in the same straight line as the walk only folded, and the feet kiss as they go around the corner. Stay on the ball of the foot or your back will ache later. The free foot tucks does not swing out, it tucks in next to the pivot foot. And reach.

3. Molinetta’s (or grapevines): Changing Fronts to Backs

How do I change a front step into a back? By way of a side step! Front-side-back. Or Back-side-front. When you put these together in a chain, you get the grapevine, like at a Greek wedding. Front-side-back-side-front-side-back-side. With a partner, they have a way of turning around the leader who becomes the post for the millwheel (Molinete means mill, driven by a man or a donkey in the old days). This is your default, it’s what every tango dancer knows, if front-side, then back. If back-side, then front. Travel around, reach. Make all the steps the same size.

4. And, The Crossada or Cross

So far, all the steps have been regular grammar – if I can do it with a front, I can do it with a back; if I can do it to the right, I can do it to the left. There is one more step that is found only in Argentine tango, that distinguishes it from all other dances, and this is the crossada or cross. It is a ritualistic way of asking the question “Do you dance the Argentine tango?” The leader steps to the follower’s right, asking the question, Do you dance the Argentine tango? And the follower answers with the cross, saying, “Yes, I dance the Argentine tango.”

The cross occurs when the leader steps to the followers right side, signalling them to walk two more steps and then slide the outside (left) foot tightly inside the right foot and change weight. This brings the follower back in front of the leader, restoring harmony in the home, and it causes the dance to curve to the left, in the line of dance. The cross has no logic, the reason we cross is “because”. Like any irregular grammar, the way you learn is you memorize it.

5. What You Need To Know

The leader counts on the follower to finish each step and to complete the grapevine without being asked. The follower’s job is to learn their defaults and to take equal sized steps. They must dance, reach and take long steps, and execute the front-side-back and back-side-front without being asked. And get used to the idea that every time the leader steps to your right side, something is expected of you, that you have two steps to wake up and remember to cross.