

Balls and Milongas in Vienna and Buenos Aires: analysis and comparison

S. Elefante⁽¹⁾, M. V. Arenillas⁽²⁾, S. Jovicic⁽¹⁾, M. Elefante⁽¹⁾, C. Black⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾www.tangogroup.eu, ⁽²⁾www.amartango.com

Introduction

The origins of the balls in the Austrian capital can be traced back to the times of the Vienna Congress (1815) in the period of the birth of the waltz. The tradition is still so alive and heartfelt that up to four hundred balls are celebrated in Vienna annually [1] [2] [3]. Over the decades, new rhythms have been added to the traditional ballroom dances such as rock n 'roll, salsa and from 2017 also the rhythm born in the Río de la Plata region: Argentine tango.

In this context, the question arises whether a tradition like the Viennese balls also developed in Buenos Aires during the 19th century. Through the analysis of historical sources, we will find evidence that show that balls were organized not only in Buenos Aires but also in other regions of Argentina.

For the purposes of our discussion, we will limit our analysis to these two major influences: the balls in Vienna and Buenos Aires. Notably, H. Ferrer in the lyrics of the poem entitled *Vals del 18* lovingly remembers his aunt during the time when balls were organised in Buenos Aires. She went to these parties in the early 1900s and danced different rhythms, including Viennese waltz, foxtrot ... and perhaps also Argentine tango.

Drawing on these historical documents and on the interpretation of these lyrics we aim to reconstruct and compare the balls of Buenos Aires and Vienna to explore the properties and dimensions of the milongas (the dancing event of the Argentine tango) in these two locations. We will retrace these dance events by comparing historical periods, locations, social groups, musical genres, invitation etiquette, dress code, and the conclusion of the evening. We will embark on a journey between the past and the present, discovering the points of contact and divergence between these historical and cultural events.

Vals del 18 <i>A. Piazzolla and H. Ferrer (1981)</i>	
Spanish	English
Gira tu vals ¿ del diez y ocho ?, se lo escribí con amor a tu nostalgia.	Turn your waltz of the eighteen? I wrote it with love to your nostalgia.
Gira tu vals,	Turn your waltz,

<p>gira que gira y su son se sienta al piano a pensar tu juventud.</p> <p>Cuando alumbrabas vos la vida del tiempo aquel que fue mejor, toda de lámpara vestida, con flecos hasta en el rubor.</p> <p>Gira tu vals, me pongo el frac, ¡por favor!, vamos los dos a bailar.</p> <p>Y tu memoria de abuela ya se cuajó de pimpollos. Por vos, ¡hay que ver!, los buenmozos de ayer suspiran haciendo roncar sus cupés.</p> <p>Tu corazón se peinó a la Garçon y tu pudor lleva corset. Y a tu hermosura un poeta la toma por la cintura: el dulce ladrón que a su vida te ató aquel que ya no está.</p> <p>Gira tu vals del diez y ocho, ¿sabés?, que en la emoción se te ven los quince años.</p> <p>Gira tu vals gira que gira y su son usa polainas; también toma rapé.</p> <p>Brilla en tus ojos la alegría de cuando se firmó la paz, y en cartón lleno y lotería, bailás foxtrot y lo cantás.</p> <p>Gira tu vals que el nieto loco escribió, vamos los dos a soñar.</p> <p>Trenzan tus canas de abuela lunas del año diez y ocho, y John Barrymore desde un cine a pedal te dice un piropo con voz de alcanfor.</p> <p>Bebe tu ayer su copita de anís y el bastidor, borda el final:</p> <p>con un retrato en las manos te vas quedando dormida. Y el rayo de luz que te besa al dormir, el que ya no está.</p>	<p>turn that turns and its sound sits at the piano to think your youth.</p> <p>When you lit up the life of the time that was better, all dressed as a lamp, fringed up to the blush.</p> <p>Turn your waltz, I will wear a tailcoat, please! Let us both dance.</p> <p>And your memory of grandmother is already filled with blossoms. For you, you have to see!, the beautiful gentlemen from yesterday sigh made their coupes snore.</p> <p>Your heart combed a la Garçon and your modesty wears a corset. And your beauty a poet takes her by the waist: the sweet thief who tied you to his life the one who is no more.</p> <p>Turn your waltz of the eighteen, do you know? that in the emotion they see you fifteen years.</p> <p>Turn your waltz turn that turns and its sound you wear spats; as well take snuff.</p> <p>Joy shines in your eyes from when peace was signed, and with a full cardboard and lottery, you dance foxtrot and you sing it.</p> <p>Turn your waltz that the silly grandson wrote, let us both dream.</p> <p>Braid your grandmother's grey hair moons of the year eighteen, and John Barrymore from a pedal theatre says a compliment with a camphor voice</p> <p>Drink your past in her glass of anise and the frame, embroider the end:</p> <p>with a portrait in the hands you are falling asleep. And the ray of light that kisses you when you sleep, the one that is gone.</p>
--	---

Historical period

Since the time of the Vienna Congress, the Austrian capital has become famous, among other things, for its sumptuous and magnificent balls. Each year more than four hundred balls are held in Vienna, often in the city's beautiful historic buildings [1] [2] [3]. Coinciding with the start of the carnival (on November 11), the ball season opens in Vienna to the notes of a public waltz that is danced in the historic city centre. According to the tradition, the ball season is expected to terminate on the Carnival Tuesday, although these dancing parties today are now celebrated throughout the year.

In Buenos Aires the balls were present since at least 1877, as illustrated by the advertising poster of the Opera ball (fig. 1). In the decade of 1910-1920, we can presume that the balls were still extremely popular in the Argentine capital as H. Ferrer wrote the *Vals of 18* precisely in memory of such an event which took place in the year 1918. The months of the year in which these events were organized, indicate that in Buenos Aires balls were also celebrated during the Carnival period. By carefully examining the advertising poster of the Opera ball (fig. 1), we can precisely identify the date on which this event took place: it corresponds to the 20th and 21st of January 1877. Furthermore, figure 2 shows the poster of six balls that were organized during the Carnival period of 1917 at the Colón theatre in Rosario di Santa Fe and demonstrates that balls were widespread not only in the Argentine capital but also in other cities. Moreover, the dancing party that took place in the Broadway theatre in Calle Corrientes (fig. 3) refers to a masked ball, thus suggesting that this event also took place during the Carnival period. In addition, the poster of figure 4 explicitly advertises a Carnival ball that was organised at the multifunctional *Luna Park* stadium situated in the central Calle Corrientes. In this location, many balls took place during the 1940s and '50s. Figure 5 shows a photo that has been shot during one of these events. The poster shown in figure 6 reveals that even in 1963 the carnival balls were still present in the Argentine capital. However, there is no evidence yet to ascertain whether balls were organised only during the Carnival period in Argentina or regularly throughout the year, or if the ball tradition was already present before 1877 and when their decline began.

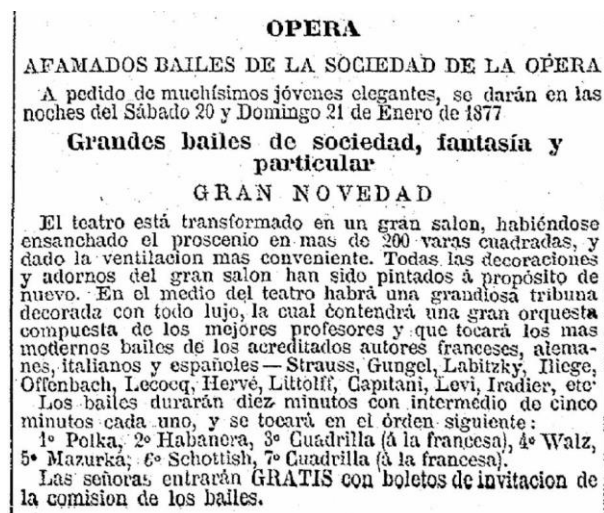


Fig. 1. Opera balls in Buenos Aires on the 20th and 21st of January 1877 [5]



Fig. 2. Six balls at the Colón theatre in Rosario di Santa Fe, carnival 1917 [6]



Fig. 3. Masked ball in Broadway-Theatre, Calle Corrientes, Buenos Aires (unknown year, probably '30) [7]



Fig. 4. Carnival ball in Luna Park, Calle Corrientes, Buenos Aires (unknown year, probably '40) [8]



Fig. 5. Photo of a carnival ball in Luna Park (end of the '40) [9]



Fig. 6. Carnival ball in Club Comunicaciones, Av. San Martín, Buenos Aires, 1963 [10]

Milongas, and Argentine tango in general, originated in the Río de la Plata region during the last half of the 1800s and it soon spread from Latin America to Europe reaching the major European capitals in the first decade of the 1900. Vienna had a wonderful outburst of events with this new dance and people could hear the notes of this new rhythm in many clubs and theatres [4]. Currently, in the Austrian capital as well as in Buenos Aires, milongas take place regularly throughout the year and we cannot say that there are periods in which these events are more frequent.

Locations

Being considered as exceptional dancing parties, the balls in Vienna are mostly organized in the beautiful setting of historical buildings. Very prestigious are those that are celebrated in the magnificent Hofburg Imperial Palace and in the Town Hall (fig. 7). These are grandiose events that can welcome more than a thousand guests and give the opportunity to the dancers to dance until early in the morning. Notably, the Opera ball is deemed to be “the ball of all the balls” as it is the most prestigious and influential among all (fig. 8).



Fig. 7. Hofburg Imperial Palace during the TU Ball (left) and Vienna Town Hall during the Ball of Sciences (right)



Fig. 8. Colón Theatre in Buenos Aires (left) and Vienna Opera House (right)

There are indications that the elegant context of the Viennese balls is comparable to the balls organized in Buenos Aires. From the text of the *Vals del 18*, we can presume that the gentlemen had the possibility to wear a tailcoat, as H. Ferrer writes "*I will wear a tailcoat, please! Let us go and dance.*". Therefore, given the type of clothing, we can assume that the balls in Buenos Aires were also organized in prestigious places. To reinforce this impression, there are documents that underline that even in the Argentine capital, the balls were celebrated both at the Opera (fig. 1 and 2) and in prestigious theatres such as those located in the central Calle Corrientes (fig. 3 and 4). The photograph shot during a ball organised in the multifunctional hall *Luna Park* (fig. 5), a location in which concerts were organized alongside sporting events, confirms the reliance on extraordinary and impressive spaces. The photo also uncovers that these events could host a considerable number of guests.

On the contrary, the Argentine tango was danced in milongas organized in popular places that were within everyone's reach. Even today, milongas are generally set up in locations of daily use and only in few circumstances, for example during festivals, they are organized in extraordinary locations. In any case, event's promoters are those who, based on their tastes and needs, determine the place and environment in which to organize and spend the evening.

Social groups

In Vienna, guests of the balls were typically shared a common profession and the same social status. Since the early 1800s, various trade groups (for example the students and staff of the Technical

University) used to honor their respective professions by organizing dance parties [1] [2] [3]. This tradition has survived until today. However, nowadays the balls are also organised by groups of people sharing a common interest (for example hunters and people from the same region) rather than solely the guilds. Furthermore, the balls traditionally offered the possibility to young ladies to be introduced to the society as *debutantes*. Today, they still play a symbolic yet an important role within the ball's celebration as the *debutantes* are usually involved in the ceremonial opening of the ball with a show (fig.9) which usually includes Viennese waltz.



Fig. 9. Opening ceremony of the debutantes during the Technical University ball (TU Ball) in 2018 in Hofburg Imperial Palace (left) and the Ball of Sciences in 2020 in Vienna Town Hall (right)

Conversely, not enough evidence has been found to assert that balls in Buenos Aires were related to professional guilds and whether on these occasions the *debutantes* had the opportunity to make an appearance. The poster of figure 10 advertises a Spanish festival and therefore we can suppose that this ball was a celebration of people who in any case shared a common interest. Instead, the poster of figure 11 presents the magazine's ball "*Cine Argentino*" and therefore we could presume that this is a dancing party organised by a professional group.



Fig. 10. Spanish ball included musicians of Argentine tango and Paso Doble in Teatro San Martín, Buenos Aires [11]



Fig. 11. Magazine's ball *Cine Argentino* in *Atlanta*, *Buenos Aires* (unknown year) [12]

Milongas, in contrast, have no connection with professions or with groups sharing an interest as they are events conceived predominantly to dance. They emerged in Buenos Aires' suburbs and were a way for immigrants to not only enjoy themselves and spend a pleasant evening but eventually to also meet their future spouse. They have, thus, maintained a strong popular character of ordinary dancing parties irrespective of the commemoration of a particular professional event.

Musical genres

The balls in Vienna are considered a magnificent celebration of the music and dance arts. With this in mind, other rhythms have progressively been added to the traditional ballroom dances over the years. Consequently, nowadays guests can enjoy orchestras and DJs playing a diverse range of music from the Viennese waltz to the foxtrot, from swing to salsa and bachata. The various rhythms are played in separate rooms thus making sure that any musical taste of the dancer is satisfied.

Although in the second decade of 1900's Vienna, Argentine tango had a great impact [4], no sources have been found to show that a milonga was included in a ball, besides only sporadic shows / performances that took place over the last twenty years. Conversely, documents have been found that testify that this rhythm has been explicitly excluded from the balls [2]. For example, figure 12 presents a poster, circa 1920-1930, in which the Argentine tango is dismissively barred from the 23rd *Vienna City Ball*. On that occasion, the ball committee decided that the rhythm born in the Río de la Plata region would be omitted from the dance program following a meeting which was held in the presence of the city's Mayor [4].

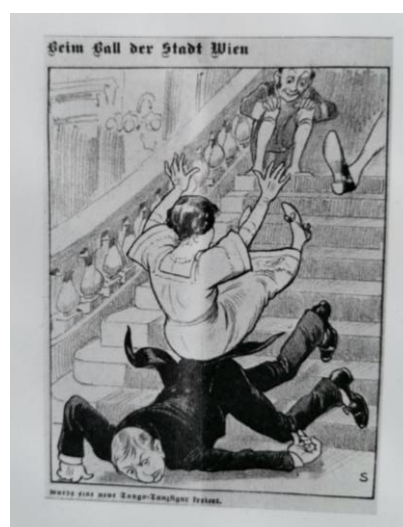


Fig. 12. Argentine tango is excluded from the 23rd ball of the City of Vienna, 1914 [4]

Only since 2017, Argentine tango has permanently entered the traditional Viennese balls through the prestigious Technical University Ball (TU Ball) which now regularly includes a milonga in its program [1] [2]. Other balls have progressively followed, as for instance the Concordia Ball which in 2018 organized a themed evening dedicated to Argentine tango, and the Wissenschaftsball which since 2019 includes tango into its musical program.

In relation to Argentina, there are several historical sources which reveal that in the Argentine capital the balls also included different musical genres. Indeed, H. Ferrer writes in his *Vals del 18* “Turn your waltz” and then adds “You dance foxtrot”. In the Opera ball of the 1877 (fig. 1) many rhythms were included in the program of the evening: polska, habanera, mazurka, waltz, cuadrilla etc. The poster shown in figure 3 advertises a ball in which Argentine tango and other three rhythms were danced during the evening: foxtrot, rumba and vals. Unfortunately, we cannot clearly deduce on that occasion whether the Viennese or the criollo waltz was played. We can reasonably guess that the typical Lomuto orchestra played Argentine tango, milonga and vals criollo while the Ivan Weishaus orchestra performed Viennese waltz. Moreover, the poster of figure 13 advertises balls in which the rhythm born in the Río de la Plata region was danced during the evening together with jazz and swing, while in the ball of figure 4 it was accompanied by jazz and Hawaiian serenades. In the Spanish festival (fig. 6) Argentine tango probably shared the evening with the paso doble. However, there were also balls similar to milongas nowadays, as for instance the event that was organised at the Colón theatre in Rosario of Santa Fe in 1917. In that occasion, only the orchestras of Firpo and Canaro were included in the ball program (fig. 2) and, therefore, we can reasonably argue that only Argentine tango, vals criollo and milonga were played.



Fig. 13. Poster advertising balls in Buenos Aires with musicians of Argentine tango, Jazz and Swing

Historically and even nowadays to a lesser extent, the milongas are events where people have the possibility to dance different genres of music. Although there is undoubtedly a certain and evident prevalence of Argentine tango, people can still dance other rhythms that in the past have included for example jazz, Caribbean music, rock n 'roll and Argentine folklore. According to Eduardo Arquimbau, dancer and tango teacher, the percentage of rhythms other than Argentine tango in the Buenos Aires' milongas during his time ('50s) could even reach 50% [13].

On the one hand, in the suburbs of contemporary Buenos Aires and in the interior of the country there are still milongas with a large percentage of other rhythms; on the other hand, in the rest of the world, as in some milongas in the centre of Buenos Aires, a model of some milongas of Buenos

Aires' centre has been typically established in which only Argentine tango, vals criollo and milonga are played.

Invitation etiquette

In the past, ladies had the opportunity to use the *Carnet de Bal* (fig. 14) during the balls both in Vienna and in Buenos Aires [5]. It was a booklet in which the various rhythms that would be played during the evening were written. Next to them was a free space to write the name of the dancer. When the gentleman invited her, either at the beginning of the evening to reserve a specific dance or during the ball, she had the opportunity to write down the gentleman's name alongside the specific rhythm.

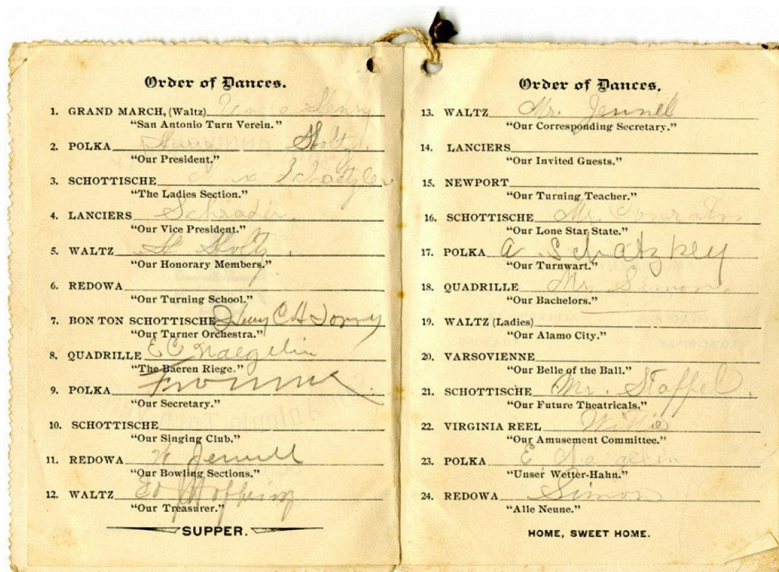


Fig. 14. Example of carnet de bal [5]

In Vienna, this custom is now in disuse and the gentleman invites the lady by simply politely asking her if she could grant him a dance. Remembering that the dances are linked to the professional context, it is certainly possible to invite an accompanied lady to strengthen not only their friendship but also their professional relations.

In contrast, with the milongas it is customary for the gentleman to invite the lady to dance through the *cabeceo*, which consists of a gentle movement of his head. If she agrees, she confirms the invitation also with a nod of her head. Then, the gentleman can finally approach her, and they can begin dancing. Furthermore, in the milongas it is not common to invite an accompanied lady unless she clearly shows that she wishes to dance with other dancers besides her partner. To support this practice, in the traditional milongas men and women sit facing each other to facilitate the *cabeceo* while couples who wish to spend the evening together sit at the tables that are arranged on the third side of the hall. However, this tradition of invitation appears to be relatively recent, as documents and posters show that at the beginning of the 20th century men stood in the center of the hall and invited the ladies from that position. The women, in contrast, occupied the areas close to the walls. Mothers and older sisters were seated while the young ladies were standing [14].

Nowadays, however, it is increasingly common to find milongas where the traditional way of inviting is not followed, and it is now possible that a lady takes the initiative and asks a gentleman to dance. The roles of man and woman during the dance are also no longer rigid and can be exchanged, as we can now often see ladies playing the part of the gentleman.

Dress code

In most of the Viennese balls there is a dress code that participants must respect. The organizers, in fact, reserve the right to deny access to those who wear clothes that do not follow the rules. In the strictly traditional balls women are required to wear a long dress that must cover the knees and reach the ankles while the model and colour are at the discretion of the ladies. Gentlemen are expected to wear a tailcoat or a tuxedo with black shoes while the color of the bow tie can vary depending on the ball and their specific historical tradition.

In contrast, no evidence has been found to ascertain whether guests had to respect a pre-established dress code in Buenos Aires's balls. From the documents available, we can undoubtedly assume that the clothes should have been refined and in style with the event. H. Ferrer's lyrics suggest that the dancers had to be very elegant as he described that his aunt wears spats: "... *you wear spats*". Furthermore, the use of the tailcoat had to be quite common among men, as H. Ferrer adds: "*I will wear a tailcoat, please! Let us go and dance*". The photograph in figure 5 was shot during a ball organised at the Luna Park towards the end of the 1940s and confirms that the guests wore clothes of a certain elegance.

In Buenos Aires until the 1950s milongas dancers usually dressed in elegant clothes, but in any case, the women were never expected to wear a long dress. One of the reasons for this difference might be the fact that the ladies needed to be able to do typical movements of Argentine tango such as the *boleo* and *sacadas* (clearly, only from the period when these movements were added to the repertoire of the dance). However, the dress code generally depended on the context of the evening and we could expect that in luxury clubs, gentlemen used to wear tailcoats (at least until the '30s). If we consider popular milongas, dancers had the habit to dress everyday clothes, for instance, gentlemen wore jackets and shirts, outfits that nowadays might be considered elegant, but which were deemed to be common in those days.

Today's milongas do not have a specific dress code and only in rare cases, the guests are required to respect a pre-established code. Clothes can vary from elegant to casual, as it essentially depends on the organizers. Refined clothes are often expected in tango festivals, while in weekly milongas a casual outfit is usually welcome.

Conclusion of the evening

Both for the Viennese balls and for the milongas, the conclusion of the evening takes place with a common ritual that consists of playing a symbolic song. It is, in fact, tradition to end the Viennese balls by hearing the famous Johann Strauss waltz "*The beautiful blue Danube*" while the milongas usually conclude the evening with the music of the "*La Cumparsita*" which can be played in different versions and orchestras (fig. 15).



Fig. 15. Poster of "*The beautiful blue Danube*" and the "*La Cumparsita*"

In contrast, no sources have been found to determine how the balls used to terminate in Buenos Aires and whether there was a concluding ritual. However, examining the various advertising posters, we can observe that waltz orchestras and Argentine tango groups were not always present in the musical program of the evening. Therefore, we can deduce that due to the lack of the appropriate musicians it would have been complicated to conclude the evening by playing the music of "*The beautiful blue Danube*" or "*La Cumparsita*".

Conclusions

Through an historical sources' analysis and the interpretation of the *Vals del 18* lyrics, we firstly demonstrated the existence of the balls in Argentina and, afterwards, we attempted to reconstruct them to pursue a comparison with the Viennese balls and milongas.

While plenty of information is available on the Viennese balls undoubtedly also due to the issue that the ball tradition is still alive in the Austrian capital, documents regarding the Buenos Aires balls are rare and it is unclear when the balls were born, and when and why they lost popularity in the Río de la Plata region. We recognized, however, that the Vienna and Buenos Aires' balls shared many common elements such as the celebration during the same period of the year, the setup of the event in prestigious locations, the dancing of various musical genres as well as the use of elegant attires such as the tailcoat.

However, the comparison of the balls with the milongas shows substantial and profound differences. These dissimilarities can be mainly attributed to their different social backgrounds: the balls originated among the aristocracy and the upper class while the milongas were created by immigrants and the working class. In any case, even for these two types of dancing events, common features can be identified such as, for example, the ball of the Colón theatre in Rosario of Santa Fe which looks like a contemporary milonga (fig. 2) and the conclusion of the evening which is initiated in both cases by playing a symbolic musical piece: "*The beautiful blue Danube*" and "*La Cumparsita*".

At the end of this historical journey, we can conclude that what undoubtedly unifies the balls of the past, those of today, and the milongas, is the common desire of the guests to dance and enjoy. So, let us go back to the message from H. Ferrer and indirectly also from his aunt.... "*Let us both dance*". What truly matters is to simply to spend a pleasant evening and have fun dancing!

Acknowledgements

The Argentine *Tango@TU Wien & IST-Tango* university group would like to express their sincere thanks to *Luca Fiore* for the passionate discussions that helped to inspire the following article and to *José María Otero*, *Marcelo Castelo*, *Marcos Iaffa Sanchez*, *Roberto Finelli* and *Otto Eder* for providing important suggestions and historical documents.

A heartfelt acknowledgment goes also to all members of *Argentine Tango@TU Wien & IST-Tango* and of *Amartango* for their continuous and exceptional support.

Bibliography

- [1] <https://www.tangoygotan.net/2019/02/14/il-tango-argentino-a-vienna/>
- [2] <https://www.tangoygotan.net/2019/09/27/il-tango-argentino-ha-fatto-il-suo-debutto-nei-balli-tradizionali/>
- [3] <https://www.wien.info/en/music-stage-shows/dance/ball-season>
- [4] Otto Eder, “Tango!!! Ein Fremdling in Wien”
- [5] Marcelo Castelo, <https://www.facebook.com/Marcelo.O.Castelo/posts/2142458765781369>
- [6] Radiocrossovertango, <https://www.facebook.com/radiocrossovertango/posts/1007513589451821>
- [7] José María Otero, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=627652701014522&id=100013093932384
- [8] José María Otero, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1040130899766698&id=100013093932384
- [9] José María Otero, <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=1043006592812462&set=a.225962094516920>
- [10] José María Otero, <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=1043006156145839&set=a.225962094516920>
- [11] José María Otero, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=919505488495907&id=100013093932384
- [12] José María Otero, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1062105174235937&id=100013093932384
- [13] Radiocrossovertango, <https://www.facebook.com/radiocrossovertango/posts/826362474233601>
- [14] Radiocrossovertango, <https://www.facebook.com/radiocrossovertango/posts/817884795081369>