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# RESONATING TO TANGO

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By **Maureen van Althuis**



"It is actually very strange that we started teaching tango together in Gouda," says Siobhan. "This typical Dutch town has such a Christian character; the intimacy of tango doesn't fit in easily here." Oliver adds: "On top of that we are also foreigners: my wife comes from Scotland and I am from Germany. That is also unusual here."

**Siobhan DJ-ing.**

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*Photo: Ivo Chaveau*

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Nevertheless they settled happily in Gouda. They fell in love with a romantic little house in one of the most beautiful streets of the inner city, where nostalgic facades are decorated with plants and flowers. Oliver tells: "Before we came here I had a room outside Utrecht on the Amelisweerd estate, but that was too small for us together. And buying a house in Utrecht was too expensive." In their quest to find a home they looked further afield and discovered Gouda.

Typically Dutch or not, in Gouda Argentine tango is well-loved and the city is known to dancers throughout the Netherlands, largely due to the successful salon Sweet Milonga where Siobhan and Oliver are house DJs. Their dance school, Las Rosas del Tango, is also doing well. They have two weekly evening classes and Siobhan's private lessons are popular.

In the meanwhile the role of DJ has taken an increasingly important place in both of their lives. Oliver has been performing as a tango DJ since 1995; Siobhan since 2008. If they are asked, they are also happy to perform together as a DJ-couple. They play only traditional tango music without excursions into other musical genres. "You see that many DJs nowadays play non-tango, that they want to try something new and play other music, or want to show their discoveries," says Oliver.



Siobhan thinks that is a pity: "In the golden age of tango the most beautiful pieces of music were recorded. Of the two hundred orchestras playing at that time, the best have already stood the test of time. The music is so rich and has so much depth. I can dance a thousand times to the same number by Di Sarli: it never gets boring."

## **“Music and movement are our essence”**

But first, back to the beginning: how they met, during a tango salon in El Corte in July 2005. Oliver tells: "I was sitting on a sofa with friends. My attention was caught by a dancer who walked past me. I followed her with my eyes, and I thought, how strange, the way that this woman walks is how I imagine my wife would walk." The couple married six months later.

Oliver was born in Canada and grew up in Germany. Before he came to the Netherlands in 1996 he was an actor and drama teacher in Stuttgart. Dance and movement had always had a central place in his life. When he discovered tango it deepened his philosophy of life : "Music and movement are our essence. Tango is for me the most beautiful way to experience that. A human always wants to return to his essence and tango helps in that quest. Because in tango you let go of your intellect, which normally holds your world together. By doing so you are stepping into a different world. Beyond that you dance tango as a couple, and so are able to achieve something that you never can reach on your own, a certain weightlessness, because your bodies keep each other moving; a *perpetuum mobile*. In this togetherness the movement actually happens by itself, and one

complete autonomous whole is created. He is the engine of her movement and she is the engine of his movement.”

From his background as a drama teacher Oliver explored how he could teach tango. He worked to find his own didactic approach, searching for how best he could bring his tango knowledge and skills over to his students. For him everything has to do with walking. "I am convinced that the alphabet of the tango is in every human being: as a teacher you only help your students to remember that."

A year after their marriage, in January 2007, Oliver and Siobhan started teaching together. Oliver had preferred to start immediately after they had got married, but Siobhan was less certain: "There were so many teachers already, I did not know what I could add to that." After a vacation with her mother in Scotland she changed her mind. Beginning to understand her childhood in a new way gave Siobhan another perspective on herself and her life. "And the conclusion was that I had to do it."

Oliver had a good reputation as a tango teacher. He already taught in Nijmegen, Utrecht, Enschede and Gouda, and students came especially for him and his understanding of tango. He says: "The elements of movement in tango intrigue me. Tango feels very strange to the body at first. Your body has to master the movements and you have to re-organise yourself physically and mentally from scratch. "

Oliver and Siobhan were a good combination. They radiated harmony and unity. They were active in the Netherlands and abroad. However, this collaboration came to an abrupt end in 2009. In that year, Oliver became paralysed. Although the paralysis came on gradually, it was quick to spread. "It was a shock. The doctors in the first instance had no idea what the cause of the paralysis was. That they found out much later."

Quite soon Oliver could not walk anymore and had to stop teaching. "It was just before the summer and we had arranged a lot of work," says Siobhan.

The cause of Oliver's paralysis later turned out to be a problem in the blood circulation which caused swelling in his spinal cord. This caused a gradual paralysis of his lower body.

Siobhan got support from colleagues. "In the first year I taught with a colleague from England. She helped me very much, but there was no click. We danced a different style and did not hear the music in the same way. It didn't work out." After that Siobhan gave a lot of lessons on her own. That this was possible surprised her and she discovered how much she likes to teach on her own. "When I teach alone, I know exactly what is needed in the group. Also, it is sometimes useful to have only one vision."

In recent years, she nevertheless worked with other colleagues, and lately works with an assistant. "That gives me the freedom to keep the lead during the lessons."

In Siobhan's vision tango starts with the embrace. "Then I ask myself what kind of leader I am dancing with. Through the body, I feel where the power is and focus on that area: does he dance from his back or his chest? Or maybe from his spine, and then from the front or the back surface

of his spine, or perhaps he dances from his stomach? A man as big as a bear dances differently than one with a slim build." After the conscious experience of this physical contact, she looks for the shared experience in which they can communicate: "Is that in a shared technique, or in creative playfulness, or is it more on an emotional level, or do I have to emotionally shut myself off? Can I answer his lead through the music? It is like a conversation where you are looking for common interests. Sometimes it happens that there is no conversation at all, and that can be disappointing. Leaders must also listen to the body and the musicality of the follower. Her input is essential to the creativity of the whole. I teach women to be active. Tango is a conversation with the input of both. "

Oliver was operated in 2010. "If the doctors had not traced the cause of the paralysis, I would have died." To this he adds: "That is why we see what we are experiencing as a gift. We are so happy with everything we have, with our friends, with the tango, with Gouda that has become dear to us, and with each other - in short, with our lives. "

Although he can not dance for now his walking gets slowly better. And his love of tango continues: "I always continued to go to tango salons. I can observe, listen, remember steps, movements and postures, feel them from in the wheelchair.

I see the body as a musical instrument that plays in the tango orchestra. Do you know the phenomenon of instruments in an orchestra that are not played by the musician, but still resonate through the music of the other instruments?"

This attitude brought him further in exploring and understanding tango music and he has become a masterful tango DJ and host of his own radio show every Monday night on Gouwestad Radio. "As happy as we still are with the tango, which brought us together in the first instance, and then brought us to Gouda, and which surprises us every day with its magic, we are curious about what the future will bring - with the tango and with each other."



