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## 2. Competing in the Transnational Marketplace

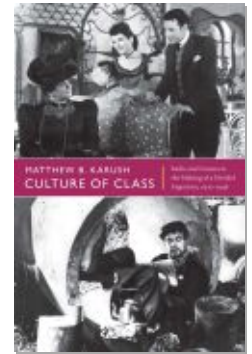
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## 2 COMPETING IN THE TRANSNATIONAL MARKETPLACE

Mass cultural technology arrived in Argentina, as it did in most of the world, as an import. The invention of the phonograph, the radio, and the cinema, and the growth of industries in the United States and Europe dedicated to commercializing these entertainments, had a globalizing impact, as these nascent industries energetically pursued overseas markets. Nevertheless, the result was not a simple process of cultural imperialism. In his analysis of globalization in the contemporary world, Arjun Appadurai emphasizes the “tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization. . . . At least as rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies they tend to become indigenized in one or another way.”<sup>1</sup> This was no less true at the dawn of the mass cultural era. Throughout the world, the new technologies disseminated the cultural products and ideological messages of the developed world, but at the same time, they were quickly put to use in packaging local popular culture for the domestic market. The result was the elaboration

tion of national cultural products in dialogue with those imported from abroad. The film scholar Miriam Hansen argues that Hollywood movies “offered something like the first global vernacular,” a discourse through which people around the world made sense of the dislocations of modernity. In Buenos Aires, as elsewhere, local filmmakers responded by elaborating what Hansen calls an “alternative vernacular modernism,” a reconfiguration of North American models of genre, cinematography, and style capable of articulating the fantasies and anxieties of the Argentine mass public.<sup>2</sup> And this creative reworking of imported culture was not limited to the cinema; similar processes shaped the local recording and radio industries.

The rapid adoption of mass cultural technologies in the 1920s and 1930s inserted ordinary Argentines into global cultural circuits to an unprecedented extent. When local entrepreneurs and artists began to produce and distribute cultural commodities for the new media, they faced a marketplace already saturated with imported culture.<sup>3</sup> The expectations and aesthetic preferences of Argentine audiences were shaped by extensive exposure to jazz music and Hollywood films, among other imported products. In this transnational marketplace, Argentine mass culture succeeded commercially to the extent that it offered an alternative modernism capable of reconciling local traditions with cosmopolitan modernity. Given the enormous prestige of mass cultural products from the United States, as well as the cachet of modernity that attached to them, local producers needed both to emulate those products as well as to distinguish their own offerings. They strove simultaneously to reproduce North American style and technical achievement and to emphasize their own distinct, national authenticity.

The transnational marketplace thus had contradictory effects, creating enormous demand for both the foreign and the national. Argentines danced the fox trot and watched the latest Hollywood releases, but their thriving mass cultural industries produced music, radio shows, and movies that repackaged and celebrated Argentine popular culture. And these commodities were themselves shaped by transnational pressures. Tango music took on many of the sonic characteristics of jazz, even as it asserted its claim to represent Argentine national identity. Radio programmers developed an increasingly standardized menu of offerings that set tango music and gaucho melodramas alongside cosmopolitan genres. Filmmakers sought to combine Hollywood style and technique with the-

matic material drawn from Argentine popular culture. These efforts attracted large audiences but yielded persistent ideological contradictions. In particular, the new mass culture tended to celebrate the cultural practices of poor Argentines, an affiliation that often undermined the attempt to emulate modernity.

#### THE RECORDING INDUSTRY, JAZZ, AND THE RISE OF THE TANGO

Some twelve years after the German American Emile Berliner invented the gramophone in 1888, the new machines arrived in Buenos Aires, and shortly thereafter local companies began recording music onto discs. During these early years, many local record labels competed in Buenos Aires, but the economic convulsions precipitated by the First World War forced smaller enterprises out of business. Beginning in the 1920s, four foreign companies dominated the Argentine market: Victor, Columbia, and Brunswick, all based in the United States, and the German conglomerate Odeon. These companies sold North American and European recordings to Argentine consumers, but they also invested considerable resources in recording local artists. The fact that the recording of Argentine music was largely the work of foreign companies undoubtedly shaped Argentine music history. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the influence of foreign standards and preferences was highly mediated. Both the selection of material and the actual recording process were typically in the hands of local producers. Each of the major recording companies had a local representative who enjoyed the exclusive right to distribute its catalogue and to record local acts.

Easily the most important of these local mediators was Max Glücksmann, an Austrian Jew who emigrated to Argentina at the age of fourteen in 1890. Shortly after his arrival in Buenos Aires, Glücksmann went to work at the Casa Lepage, a small photography shop. Very early on, Glücksmann foresaw the commercial potential of new technology in both cinema and audio recording. With the French-born cinematographer Eugenio Py, Glücksmann began making short silent films and eventually became a prolific producer of newsreels. He was also active in distributing foreign films to local movie theaters. In 1908 Glücksmann was able to purchase the Casa Lepage and that same year, he built his first movie theater, the Buckingham Palace. Around the same time, he became the

Argentine agent for the German Odeon record label. In addition to selling the company's international catalogue, Glücksmann dedicated himself to recording local acts for his own label, Discos Nacional-Odeon (later, Discos Dobles Nacional). He signed an exclusive contract with the tango bandleader Roberto Firpo, and in 1912 he succeeded in overcoming the technical obstacles involved in recording a band that included piano. In 1917 he signed the singing duo of Carlos Gardel and José Razzano, who until that point had specialized in folk songs. Gardel's recording of the tango "Mi noche triste" that year would later be credited with inaugurating the golden era of tango song. Glücksmann retained popular artists like Gardel by offering generous contracts that guaranteed royalty payments. Seeking to reduce the price of phonograph records in order to reach a broader audience, Glücksmann opened the first record factory in Argentina in 1919 so that he would no longer need to ship the masters to Germany for pressing. In 1926 Glücksmann's studio adopted the electric microphones invented by Bell Laboratories the previous year, keeping pace with international technology and his local competitors, Victor and Columbia. Throughout these years, he built an extensive catalogue, recording most of the major tango singers and musicians of the period. By the early 1930s, Glücksmann was an impresario; he owned seventy movie theaters, and his company employed some fifteen hundred workers.<sup>4</sup>

Entrepreneurs like Glücksmann, as well as the talent scouts and engineers who worked for them, had a far more direct influence on Argentine popular music than the foreign record companies. Glücksmann himself seems to have been more interested in making a profit than in advancing any particular musical preference. Lacking any background in music, he drew on local expertise when it came to deciding which acts to record. He pursued Carlos Gardel, for example, after being encouraged to do so by José González Castillo, a playwright and prolific tango lyricist who was employed by Glücksmann's firm as a translator of subtitles for imported films.<sup>5</sup> Glücksmann worked hard to respond to the preferences of his audience. Beginning in 1924, Discos Nacional hosted an annual contest in which audience members would select their favorite tangos. The first contest was held in Glücksmann's luxurious Teatro Grand Splendid in downtown Buenos Aires and broadcast on the recently founded Radio Grand Splendid. The competing tangos were performed by Roberto Firpo's orchestra, which immediately recorded the prizewinners for Glücksmann's label.<sup>6</sup> These contests enabled fans to hear their favorite musicians, pro-

vided Glücksmann with a sort of “focus group” to test the market potential of new compositions, and also served as a clever marketing device. By prominently featuring the results of the contests in its advertising, *Discos Nacional* could assure the public of the popularity of its records even before they went on sale. These and other strategies made Glücksmann’s company the most important player in the Argentine recording business; Victor, Columbia, and other companies competed with *Nacional* to sign the most popular local acts. Thus, the key decisions about how to build a domestic market for recorded music were made not in North American or European boardrooms but in Buenos Aires by entrepreneurs assessing local tastes. The introduction of recording technology and the penetration of foreign companies into the Argentine market did not result in the Americanization of Argentine popular music. On the contrary, through the mediation of local entrepreneurs like Glücksmann, these powerful cultural forces were, to borrow Appadurai’s term, “indigenized.”

Nevertheless, the appropriation of foreign technology was inevitably shaped by the unequal distribution of economic and cultural capital. The economic power of recording companies based in the United States meant that North American musical styles were disseminated widely in Argentina, while the image of the United States as the locus of all things modern lent those styles an undeniable prestige. Jazz, in particular, began to attract the attention of the most cosmopolitan porteños during the 1920s. Many records that were hits in the American market sold well in Buenos Aires, especially the symphonic jazz of Paul Whiteman, the so-called King of Jazz, and the “sweet” sounds of the Benson Orchestra of Chicago. As was the case in other locales, the “hotter” jazz played by African American bands was less influential, at least at first.<sup>7</sup> Since porteño dancers demanded to hear “fox trots,” as the songs played by jazz bands were known in Argentina, local bands made it their business to play and even record them. In the early 1920s, tango bandleaders like Roberto Firpo, Francisco Canaro, and Francisco Lomuto, as well as singers like Gardel, included fox trots and “shimmies” in their repertoire, and bandleaders like Pedro Maffia, Francisco Pracánico, and Juan Carlos Bazán offered both jazz and tango.<sup>8</sup> Composers got into the act as well: in 1928 the tango lyricist Luis Rubinstein published the fox trot “¡Oh! Girl! (¡Oh, Muchacha!).”<sup>9</sup>

For many of these musicians and composers, offering an occasional fox trot was a way of cashing in on the latest fad. But by the 1930s, the

increasing popularity of both jazz and tango encouraged a process of specialization. Most tango bands now left jazz to local outfits like the Dixie Pals and the Santa Paula Serenaders. At this point, the two genres confronted each other as competitors, and devotees of tango increasingly saw the popularity of jazz as a threat to national prestige. In 1933 a cartoon in the fan magazine *La Canción Moderna* announced Roberto Firpo's decision to stop performing jazz. Playing on the fact that Firpo had the same last name as the great Argentine heavyweight Luis Firpo, the cartoon depicted the bandleader as a boxer and proclaimed that he had launched "a bloody struggle against the American fox-trot."<sup>10</sup> And Firpo was not alone in his desire to see tango triumph over jazz. One letter writer to the magazine *Sintonía* urged Osvaldo Fresedo's *orquesta típica* to stop playing fox trots and concentrate instead on "those rhythmic and beautiful tangos to which we are accustomed,"<sup>11</sup> while others bemoaned the omnipresence of jazz on the radio: "I cannot conceive how eight of the ten stations currently broadcasting can simultaneously be playing fox-trots."<sup>12</sup>

Not all porteños saw jazz and tango as implacable antagonists, and the two musics coexisted in the same record catalogues and magazines and on the same radio stations and bandstands throughout the period. Nevertheless, the competition with jazz had a profound effect on the tango. Many tango musicians were inspired by the jazz records they heard, from which they freely borrowed musical ideas. Adolfo Carabelli, a classically trained pianist, became a devotee of the new music in the late 1910s, formed a jazz band, and began recording, at first for the small Electra label and then for Victor. In 1925 when Victor decided it needed a house band in order to compete with Nacional-Odeon for the tango market, the label hired Carabelli to form the now legendary Orquesta Típica Victor. The next year, Victor named Carabelli its artistic director in Argentina, and he oversaw the label's growing offerings in both jazz and tango. Carabelli's own band included the *bandoneón* and violins typical of tango bands, but also a tuba and a drum kit; his was a hybrid music.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Osvaldo Fresedo's influential brand of tango was deeply influenced by American jazz, notwithstanding the objections of Fresedo's more orthodox fans. Fresedo was one of three Argentine tango musicians sent by Victor to record in the company's studio in Camden, New Jersey, in 1920. Although the so-called Orquesta Típica Select had little impact, Fresedo seems to have returned with new ideas. He would go on to a long and extremely productive career,

during which he was not afraid to experiment, incorporating both the vibraphone and the drum set into his band.<sup>14</sup>

The influence of jazz on Argentine popular music went beyond the adoption of brass and percussion instruments. The cachet of American mass culture, its aura of modernity, exerted an irresistible appeal, one that is apparent, for example, in the English name of Glücksmann's Grand Splendid Theater and radio station. The prestige of jazz undoubtedly helped shape audience expectations and preferences. Having been exposed to the latest hits from the United States, Argentine audiences expected recordings of local music to live up to North American production standards. But more than that, they responded to tangos that shared certain musical affinities with jazz. In this way, musical styles that had been developed in order to sell records in the United States exerted an indirect, but important influence on Argentine music. During the 1920s, record companies like Victor achieved success by promoting what the historian William Howland Kenney has described as "a synthesis of jazz with late Victorian sentiment and propriety."<sup>15</sup> Victor's biggest star was Whiteman, a white bandleader who offered listeners a refined, technically sophisticated version of jazz that seemed appropriate for the homes of the middle-class consumers Victor sought to attract. In Argentina, Whiteman's "concert-hall sound" epitomized modernity. In order to compete with records like these, Argentine musicians needed to offer music that emulated their orchestral sophistication and danceability, which in this context functioned as aural signifiers of modernity.

During the 1910s and 1920s tango bands replaced the Cuban habanera, which had provided the basic beat for early tango, with a reliance on four equal quarter notes—"the four," as tango musicians call it. Robert Farris Thompson compares this rhythmic evolution to the rise of a "four-to-the-bar" feel in big-band jazz. However, for Thompson, this similarity is evidence of a common origin: in both cases, he argues, musicians of African descent gave the music a certain "black swing."<sup>16</sup> Yet he does not say what makes the four "blacker" than the habanera, nor explain why this innovation happened when it did. Without discounting the important role played by Afro-Argentine tango musicians such as the bassist Leopoldo Thompson, I would argue that the rise of the four probably reflects the influence of jazz. If jazz was the sound of modernity, then the adoption of 4/4 time certainly made tango sound more convincingly modern.



The transformation of tango into a sophisticated, modern dance music took a big step forward in the 1920s with the emergence of the New Guard, a generation of bandleaders committed to innovation.<sup>17</sup> The New Guard included Osvaldo Fresedo, Juan Carlos Cobián, and others, but it was most clearly associated with the violinist and bandleader Julio de Caro. Among tango historians, de Caro is best known for having enriched tango's musicality by broadening its use of harmony and counterpoint and for having sought to elevate the genre by creating a symphonic tango. But de Caro's image as an innovator and modernizer was also informed by jazz. Beginning in the mid-1920s, de Caro played a "violin-cornet" specially designed for him by the technicians of the Victor Company. The look of the instrument, which used the bell of a cornet in order to amplify de Caro's solos, offended traditionalists with its obvious allusion to jazz instrumentation.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, de Caro's attempts to improve the musical quality of tango were a self-conscious response to what he saw as the "serious threat" posed by jazz.<sup>19</sup> He intended to demonstrate that the tango, "like waltzes or jazz," could be the basis for a sophisticated music.<sup>20</sup> In light of his effort to modernize tango orchestration in order to help the genre survive in the face of competition from American jazz, de Caro was described as the "porteño Paul Whiteman."<sup>21</sup> By putting de Caro and Whiteman on equal footing, the comparison affirmed de Caro's modernity as well as his commitment to refining and improving popular music.

Thanks in part to the efforts of de Caro and other New Guard bandleaders, the tango proved capable of holding its own in competition with jazz. An advertisement that appeared in 1935 reveals the extent to which tango had been reconciled with modernity (see figure 2).<sup>22</sup> The ad, which promotes radio programs sponsored by Brasso polish, features two drawings of dancers. Under the caption "Do you like tango?" an elegantly dressed couple moves while a musician plays a bandoneón. Under the caption "Do you like jazz?" an equally elegant couple dances while a trumpeter performs. Aside from the choice of instrument, subtle differences distinguish the drawings. The lowered heads of the tango dancers give them an air of seriousness, while the upturned faces of the jazz couple, which mirror the position of the trumpet, suggest frivolity. The dark hair and mustache of the male dancer in the tango drawing contrast with the lighter coloring of the jazz dancers. But notwithstanding these differences, the drawings suggest a larger similarity; jazz and tango are



2 Radio advertisement, *Sintonía*, July 6, 1935.

here depicted as two of a kind, even mirror images. Not only are the dancers similarly attired and positioned, but the curves of the drawings also echo each other. In this image, tango and jazz are equivalent, if not identical. Tango here is just as modern as jazz; it is an alternative modernism.

Competing in the mass cultural marketplace encouraged tango artists to emulate jazz modernity, but it had contradictory effects as well. Entrepreneurs hoping to create a niche for tango needed to distinguish the music from what jazz bands could offer. Tango artists could strive to be modern, but they could not hope to outdo North American jazz musicians on that score. De Caro might be the “porteño Paul Whiteman,” but Whiteman would remain the measuring stick. On the other hand, tango was well positioned to offer something jazz could not: Argentine authenticity. Responding to the mass cultural marketplace, the recording industry reinforced tango’s traditionalism and helped turn it into a symbol of Argentine national identity. The nationalization of tango is visible in some of the earliest tango recording sessions. José Tagini, the Argentine agent for Columbia Records, made the label’s first tango recordings in

1911, when he brought Vicente Greco's band into the studio. Until that moment, Argentine bands did not specialize exclusively in tango; in addition to tango, they played music suitable for a host of dances of foreign origin, including polkas, mazurkas, and *pasodobles*. But for marketing purposes, Columbia wanted to give Greco's group a name that would signal its expertise in tango; what they came up with was *orquesta típica criolla*, a somewhat redundant name meaning "traditional, native band."<sup>23</sup> While the last adjective was soon dropped, *orquesta típica* survived for decades as the generic term for a tango band. The name was ironic, for it stressed tango's traditionalism and its rootedness in Argentine culture. In reality, tango was a new musical form and one that was constantly evolving. Greco himself had recently expanded his trio of bandoneón, violin, and guitar into a sextet including piano and flute. And while tango's precise origins remain the subject of debate, it was undoubtedly a hybrid form that drew on the music and dance traditions of Afro-Argentines, those of the interior provinces, as well as various international influences, including the Cuban habanera and the musical traditions brought by Italian immigrants.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Greco's own instrument, the bandoneón, whose distinctive tones were just then emerging as the defining sonority within any *orquesta típica*, was a German concertina only recently introduced in Argentina.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, in their efforts to position tango in a competitive marketplace, the record companies constructed tango as *típico*, or traditionally Argentine. Columbia's catalogues reinforced this construction by listing tango records in a section labeled *criollo*, or "native," alongside other sections dedicated to jazz and classical music.

Despite tango's hybridity, its links to rural, folk culture made the *criollo* label plausible. We have already seen that Carlos Gardel began his career as part of a duo of folk singers before deciding to specialize in tango after 1917. The Gardel-Razzano duo performed both traditional pieces and contemporary songs composed in traditional styles.<sup>26</sup> During the 1910s and 1920s, this sort of folk music, inspired by various musical forms with roots in the Argentine interior, enjoyed great popularity among urban audiences. Ignacio Corsini, later celebrated by many as the second greatest male tango singer, also began his career as a singer of rural folk songs as did Agustín Magaldi, who, before becoming a major tango star, performed as one half of a duo modeled on Gardel-Razzano.<sup>27</sup> Gardel, Corsini, and Magaldi were, in effect, professionalizing folk tradi-

tions. In particular, they drew on the rich tradition of the payadores, traveling, guitar-playing singers who specialized in competitive, lyrical improvisation. Their commercial success was part of a broader vogue for rural, popular culture in Buenos Aires. During this era of rapid modernization and massive immigration, porteños of various social classes embraced everything criollo, applying the label to rural cultural practices that contrasted with the culture of Europeanized aristocrats or working-class immigrants. The 1890s witnessed an explosion of criollista literature, popular pulp fiction that narrated in verse the heroics of renegade gauchos. At the same time, both working- and middle-class porteños flocked to the city's criollo circuses, where they watched equestrian acrobatics, clowning, and theatrical melodramas based on criollista stories.<sup>28</sup> In so doing, they were celebrating Argentina's pre-modern, rural roots.

As a commercial trend, *criollismo* had impressive staying power. A revival in 1915 of the most famous of the criollo melodramas, Eduardo Gutiérrez's *Juan Moreira*, provided Gardel with an important early break, when several songs by the Gardel-Razzano duo were included in scene 6 as part of a "grand country fiesta."<sup>29</sup> Tango's links to criollismo, though, go well beyond Gardel, Corsini, and Magaldi. An early staging of *Juan Moreira*, by the Podestá brothers in 1889, had included a *milonga*, a dance form that was a precursor to tango. In addition, early tango lyrics often had a decidedly criollista feel.<sup>30</sup> As late as 1924, Glücksmann's first tango contest was won by Francisco Canaro's "Sentimiento gaucho." Even though the song was performed without lyrics, the title alone was enough to evoke criollismo. As a child, Canaro was a devoted fan of the criollo circuses and the gaucho dramas they featured.<sup>31</sup> In short, countrified popular culture formed a significant part of the urban milieu in which the tango was born. It was, in this sense, hardly a stretch for tango bands to be considered orquestas típicas playing criollo music. Tango performers could enhance their claims of national authenticity by emphasizing their connection to rural culture.

By the 1920s, tango was easily eclipsing folk music. Gardel's transformation was part of a larger trend, visible in the record catalogues of the day. Glücksmann, for example, recorded a diverse mixture of Argentine folk music, tango, and jazz, but over time, tango became the centerpiece of Nacional's offerings. Of the 500,000 phonograph records sold in Argentina in 1925, some 90 percent were tangos.<sup>32</sup> In hindsight, tango's commercial victory over folk might seem surprising. Despite its connec-

tions to criollista culture, tango was rooted in the cosmopolitan world of Buenos Aires. Not only did the genre originate in the capital, but tango lyrics also obsessively explored the music's roots in the *arrabales*, or slums of the big city. By contrast, the appeal of criollismo, whether in the circus, in pamphlets, or on records, lay precisely in its opposition to urban cosmopolitanism, its embrace of the national culture that preceded immigration. Surely the folk music played by the Gardel-Razzano duo and countless others would seem to have been a better candidate for the role of national symbol. But as the Brasso advertisement reveals, tango could be paired with the sophisticated, refined jazz of the 1920s, while the rustic folk music of the criollo circuses could not. Tango's combination of the traditional and the modern—what Florencia Garramuño has recently described as its “primitive modernity”<sup>33</sup>—explains why this genre emerged as the most popular Argentine musical form and the one most capable of representing the nation. In a sense, tango occupied the space between cosmopolitan jazz and traditional folk; it represented a modernized national identity.

An important element in tango's rise to national prominence, and one that has been emphasized in nearly all accounts of the genre's history, occurred outside of Argentina. The tango craze that first erupted in Paris and New York in 1913 and 1914 undoubtedly helped solidify the tango's status at home.<sup>34</sup> In particular, the stamp of approval that tango received in Europe and North America helped overcome the lingering resistance of Argentine elites who had been scandalized by the dance's immorality, its associations with prostitutes and with the urban rabble more generally. Tango's passage through transnational cultural circuits transformed it, for it was embraced by Europeans and North Americans under the sign of exoticism. For Parisian sophisticates, its appeal, like that of the American turkey trot and the Brazilian *maxixe*, lay in its titillating associations with primitive sensuality. Yet as Marta Savigliano has pointed out, tango was a different kind of exotic. Partly because the dance was less obviously associated with blacks (despite its significant roots in Afro-Argentine culture), tango enjoyed a certain distinction among the various exotic cultural practices available for European consumption. As Savigliano puts it, “Tango could be clothed in tails and satins. But it could also be put in its place. . . . Tango was a versatile, hybrid, new kind of exotic that could adopt the manners of the colonizer while retaining the passion of the colonized.”<sup>35</sup> Here, again, is tango's capacity to straddle the tra-

ditional and the modern, or from the perspective of Paris, the savage and the civilized.

The exoticizing gaze of Europeans and North Americans led inevitably to a process of stereotyping. Argentine tango artists performing abroad were obliged to appear in traditional gaucho attire, linking the tango directly to rural Argentine culture in a way that would have made little sense in Buenos Aires.<sup>36</sup> Occasionally, these stereotypes reached the level of caricature. Rudolph Valentino's famous tango performance in the 1921 film *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, the first of many Hollywood tangos, featured Valentino in a strange gaucho costume that included an Andalusian hat and a Mexican poncho. Valentino used this stereotyped tango to establish his image as the prototypical "Latin lover" and to launch his career as an international star.

The tremendous success of Valentino's film and of the tango more broadly meant that foreign stereotypes were now transmitted back to Argentine audiences.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, artists like Carlos Gardel were packaged in order to appeal to audiences beyond Argentine borders. In both of these ways, the international cultural marketplace exerted a powerful influence on the tango. Gardel's first feature-length film, *Las luces de Buenos Aires* (Millar, 1931), reveals this process. Gardel's films were not Argentine productions; they were made by Paramount and filmed in France and the United States. Spoken in Spanish and featuring numerous singing performances, the films proved enormously successful in making Gardel a star throughout Latin America, yet they were also hugely popular at home. *Las luces de Buenos Aires* had a Chilean director, but its script was written by two Argentines, Manuel Romero and Luis Bayón Herrera, who were well versed in the lyrical conventions of the tango. The film tells what by 1931 was a very well-worn story—the prototypical tango story, in fact—that of the innocent girl seduced by the bright lights of the city. In the film, the girl (Sofía Bozán) leaves her rural home in the Pampas to sing tango in Buenos Aires. She abandons her boyfriend, a ranch owner played by Gardel, in pursuit of fame and fortune. Inevitably, her success in the big city is accompanied by a descent into immorality and vice, until she is rescued by the boyfriend. The film's very explicit opposition between the purity of the country and the sinfulness of the city is signified musically. While Gardel, the morally upright representative of the country, sings folk songs, tango is the music of Buenos Aires. Yet, as Garramuño has shown, Gardel also plays a mediating role in the film. While in Buenos

Aires, he sings the tango “Tomo y obligo,” in order to denounce his girlfriend’s betrayal.<sup>38</sup> The film thus enables Gardel to personify both the rural folk and urban tango traditions.

The international association between gauchos and tango made it possible for Gardel to represent both the country and the city simultaneously, and in so doing to serve more convincingly as a national symbol. Tango’s fiercest critics, including right-wing intellectuals like Leopoldo Lugones, emphasized the urban, cosmopolitan, and immoral roots of the genre in order to contrast it with Argentina’s allegedly more noble, rural traditions.<sup>39</sup> Ironically, the exoticizing stereotypes that attached to the tango as it was consumed in Europe and North America established the genre as an internationally legible symbol of Argentine national identity by linking the tango directly to the countryside and thereby reconciling Argentine tradition with cosmopolitan modernity. These stereotypes were not adopted wholesale in Argentina, but as *Las luces de Buenos Aires* suggests, they did influence mass cultural products consumed in Argentina. It is not incidental that in the voluminous press coverage that ensued after Gardel died in a plane crash on June 24, 1935, images of Gardel in gaucho attire were numerous. He clearly donned this clothing to satisfy foreign expectations. Yet the ability of Gardel, and by extension of the tango itself, to mediate between country and city, tradition and modernity, made the genre into a powerful symbol of national identity within Argentina (see figures 3 and 4). Accounts of the reaction to Gardel’s death described the intense sorrow of both “el arrabal porteño” and “el rancho criollo.”<sup>40</sup> Similarly, long after Ignacio Corsini made his own transition from folk singer to tango star, he continued to speak to interviewers about his boyhood in the Pampas and the “country flavor” that experience lent to his interpretation of tango.<sup>41</sup>

Both the effort to market tango as a national alternative to jazz modernity and the international adoption of the genre as a civilizable exotic encouraged a deepening association between tango and Argentine national identity. Not only was tango típico, but tango stars were seen as the reflection of certain essential qualities of local identity. Azucena Maizani was not just a talented singer; she was “the greatest, most exact and most popular expression of the porteño feeling that condenses the psychology of our race, more sentimental, emotive, and melancholy than any other on earth.”<sup>42</sup> If tango was here described as a symbol of Buenos Aires, other descriptions extended its representative power to Argentina as a



3 & 4 Carlos Gardel in rural and urban attire. Courtesy of Archivo General de la Nación.



whole. *Sintonía*, for example, found national identity in the voice of another tango singer: “Mercedes Simone is very Argentine. Her songs are a piece of the guts of the people from every place in the country (la entraña popular de todos los ámbitos del país).”<sup>43</sup> These recurring depictions in music magazines may simply have reflected the marketing strategies of the local culture industries. Yet evidence suggests that the power of tango as a symbol of the nation was real enough. When Boca Juniors, a soccer team from Buenos Aires, traveled to Europe in 1925 to play a series of matches against European teams, local newspapers reported their exploits as a gauge of the nation’s prowess in the sport. Describing the transatlantic journey, the reporter for the porteño daily *Crítica* noted that the players brought tango records to remind them of home, and he pointed out how wonderful this “música criolla” sounded on the sea.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, the paper’s coverage of the Argentine Olympic soccer team in 1928 included photographs of the players dancing tango with each other in order to entertain themselves “far from the fatherland.”<sup>45</sup> Regardless of whether these tango moments were staged by the press, they reveal that tango, more than any other Argentine musical genre, could be used to depict these athletes as representatives of the national community.

Tango’s status as an alternative, authentically Argentine modernism translated into both commercial success and national symbolic status. Nevertheless, the genre’s reconciliation of tradition and modernity was never definitive. The pressures unleashed by competition with jazz pushed in opposing directions—toward emphasizing tango’s modernity and toward stressing its traditional Argentineness—and the tension between these two efforts would emerge repeatedly in the 1930s. Fan magazines celebrated tango musicians as national symbols, but they also denounced stagnation and the recycling of stale formulas in popular music. A typical issue of *La Canción Moderna* from 1933 invoked the need for change in three separate articles. The first piece decried the lack of “renovation” and congratulated one radio station for holding a contest in order to discover new talent. A second article complained about the “monotonous” state of popular music in Argentina and called on the famous tango composer Enrique Santos Discépolo to come up with something original. Finally, a reviewer complimented Francisco Pracánico’s orchestra for its radio performance of the tango “Pampa”: “It was not just another tango offered by a new orchestra similar to all the others.” The reviewer concluded that Pracánico was sure to be successful since his band was offering “new

modalities in the interpretation of tango.”<sup>46</sup> And many fans seemed to agree with these critics on the need for progress and innovation in popular music. The letters to the editor published in *Sintonía*, for example, frequently featured complaints that Argentine music was stagnating because artists were content to copy proven formulas. One sarcastically suggested that Carlos Gardel and Azucena Maizani ought to retire and simply collect a tax from their many imitators.<sup>47</sup>

But what form should progress take? Given its popularity and modernist prestige, jazz was the most obvious source of inspiration and, as we have seen, tango’s New Guard was open to its influence. Yet many tango fans rejected efforts to jazz up Argentina’s music. Calling himself “a defender of tango,” one letter writer denounced the rumba version of the classic tango “La cumparsita” played by Harry Roy’s jazz band on a radio station in Buenos Aires: “No foreign bandleader, no matter how good he thinks he is, has the right to adulterate that expression of the Argentine soul which is the tango.”<sup>48</sup> And if a Cuban-jazz tango played by an American wounded Argentine national identity, then the incorporation of jazz by Argentine tango musicians posed an even greater threat. As another letter writer put it: “There are many orquestas típicas, or bands that were orquestas típicas, but unfortunately the crazed rhythm of jazz has transformed them. And that hurts those of us who truly, sincerely feel Argentine.” Tango bands that incorporate saxophones or lengthy piano solos “have fallen in the error of imitating the North Americans”; they are “stealing something that is ours, that musical fortune that Argentines carry in their soul.”<sup>49</sup>

Tango’s capacity to offer an alternative modernism thus remained problematic. The effort to modernize the music and the struggle to preserve its authenticity—both rational responses to the marketplace—often clashed with each other. Moreover, this tension was often figured in terms of class. Whereas emulating jazz modernity involved social climbing, putting on “tails and satins,” embodying national identity often required an affiliation with the humble masses, both rural and urban, or what *Sintonía* referred to as “the guts of the people.” As Argentina’s mass cultural entrepreneurs embraced the tango and made it central not only to record catalogues but also to radio programming and to domestic movies, they were endorsing popular culture. And despite many efforts to modernize, civilize, and improve it, the tango would never lose its popular associations.

## RADIO AND THE HOMOGENIZATION OF MASS CULTURE

Companies like Victor, Columbia, and Nacional sold many records in Argentina, and particularly in Buenos Aires, but the market they served was limited. Records remained a luxury item throughout the 1920s, accessible only to a fraction of the population. A single disc, with one song on each side, cost between 2.50 and 3 pesos. And if that was expensive, the price of the phonograph itself was prohibitive. Record players dropped from about 75 pesos in 1920 to 30 pesos in 1929, but that still put them out of reach for most people in a city where even a skilled worker might only bring home between 160 and 200 pesos per month. Not surprisingly, only an estimated 4.5 percent of the Argentine population purchased records in 1925, and record sales plunged after 1930 as a result of the Depression.<sup>50</sup> But if the impact of the phonograph was limited, another new mass cultural technology would exert much greater influence. During the 1930s, the radio emerged as a more important medium, capable of reaching Argentines of virtually all classes in most of the country.

Radio technology was adopted in Argentina within a few years of its appearance in the United States and before most of Europe had discovered it. The creation of the Radio Club Argentino in 1921 revealed the existence of a large and growing movement of amateur radiophiles who built sets, developed their own technical improvements, and began broadcasting.<sup>51</sup> But radio as hobby soon gave way to radio as business; by 1930 there were eighteen commercial radio stations broadcasting in Buenos Aires.<sup>52</sup> These stations reached a much broader audience than the one to which the record companies catered. Although estimates of the number of radio receivers in Argentina vary widely, several sources suggest that there were well over one million by the middle of the 1930s, or roughly one radio for every ten people, a proportion that must have been significantly higher in urban areas.<sup>53</sup> These sets were not cheap, but in sharp contrast to a record player, once a consumer purchased a radio receiver, the music was free, as was a range of other entertainments, including sports, news, comedy, and radio theater. As a result of its far greater reach, it was the radio, more than the phonograph, that forged a national public, made stars out of artists like Gardel, and effectively disseminated new versions of national identity.

Although it did not face significant foreign competition, Argentine radio was nonetheless shaped by the transnational mass cultural mar-

ketplace. Station owners and program directors built an audience by catering to demands for both modern and authentically Argentine programs. During the early 1930s, they crafted a formula that managed to satisfy these competing demands. This menu of offerings, which featured both jazz and tango, but also radio theater, folk music, and comedy programs, constituted an alternative modernism with enormous commercial appeal. It was so successful, in fact, that it became ubiquitous. Despite the large number of stations, the Argentine radio grew increasingly homogenous over time. By the late 1930s, radio audiences throughout the country were largely listening to the same things.

In contrast to the local record business, the Argentine radio industry was never dominated by North American and European business interests. The early popularity of radio in Argentina did create an opportunity for foreign manufacturers of radio equipment, but they were slow to capitalize, allowing local suppliers to step in. While American sets were the most popular in 1932, by 1940 the U.S. Commerce Department reported that “virtually all of the receiving sets are now produced within the country.”<sup>54</sup> By 1935 some 115 Argentine factories employing fifteen hundred workers supplied most of the parts and accessories to the local market.<sup>55</sup> In an early attempt to dominate the Argentine market, a consortium of wireless companies from the United States, England, France, and Germany founded the broadcast station Radio Sudamérica in 1922, in order to increase the sale of radio equipment manufactured by member companies. But the consortium’s high prices as well as its inability to enforce its patents in Argentina limited its success. Officials at Radio Sudamérica complained that the quality of the station’s programming actually expanded demand for cheap, domestically produced radio equipment.<sup>56</sup> In late 1922, a new radio station received a commercial license from the municipal government of Buenos Aires and immediately began jamming Radio Sudamérica’s signal. The Argentine owners of Radio Cultura, as the new station was called, agreed to stop the interference in exchange for a payment from their foreign competitor.<sup>57</sup>

The key turning point for Argentina’s nascent radio industry came in 1923, when Luis Firpo challenged Jack Dempsey for the heavyweight championship. The North American company RCA, a member of the multinational consortium that owned Radio Sudamérica, transmitted the fight to Argentina using Morse code. The consortium now partnered with its former nemesis, Radio Cultura, which broadcast an instant transla-

tion of the round-by-round description. The fight was a major event in Argentina, as Firpo's attempt to unseat the American champion became a matter of national pride. Thousands of fans congregated outside newspaper offices, in theaters, social clubs, and even political party offices to hear the broadcast.<sup>58</sup> Although Dempsey's controversial victory was disappointing, the fight demonstrated the exciting potential of radio technology. Local manufacturers and dealers took advantage of the fight to run advertisements and offer discounts on radio equipment.<sup>59</sup> With popular interest in the radio exploding, a host of new stations quickly joined Radio Cultura on the dial.

In this rapidly expanding market, foreign capital played only a marginal role. Unable to compete with the domestic companies as well as the many individuals who dedicated themselves to assembling radio sets, the consortium disbanded in 1924. In November 1925, the prominent porteño newspaper *La Nación* took over the station that had once broadcast as Radio Sudamérica. As we have seen, local tastes were influenced in important ways by American and European culture, but this influence was transmitted on radio stations that were owned and operated by Argentines. Even if RCA and its European partners had enjoyed better luck with Radio Sudamérica, it is doubtful that they would have had a decisive influence on the content of radio programming in Argentina. In its effort to sell radio equipment, the consortium had largely deferred to local tastes. Radio Sudamérica's program for September 13, 1923, for example, included several "English, American, and Scotch songs," but these were far outnumbered by opera and by dozens of tangos performed by a local orquesta típica.<sup>60</sup> With the rise of commercial broadcasting, the pursuit of advertisers shaped the programming of all successful Argentine radio stations, and it is unlikely that foreign capital would have behaved differently.

Not only was the Argentine radio industry free of foreign ownership, it also faced only limited interference from the state. After an early period in which jurisdiction over the granting of broadcast licenses in Buenos Aires belonged to the navy, the Yrigoyen administration transferred regulatory authority to the Postal and Telegraphic Service of the Ministry of the Interior in 1928. The following year saw the imposition of a series of new regulations, including bans on tasteless advertising and limits on the use of recorded music. More important, the Postal and Telegraphic Service required that all radio towers be relocated outside the city of Buenos

Aires, a measure favoring well-established stations that could afford to move their antennas. A law enacted in 1933 established intellectual property rights and the remuneration of copyright holders. Finally, in 1934 an executive decree imposed a series of rules about radio content: advertising between “numbers” had to be limited to one hundred words, singing in ads was banned, as were deliberate mispronunciations of Spanish, off-color jokes, immoral songs, and offensive dramas.<sup>61</sup> While these regulations were certainly intrusive, they did not differ significantly from the sort of government oversight that functioned in the United States, where despite rules against censorship, licenses were revoked for programs deemed contrary to the public interest.<sup>62</sup> There is little evidence that Argentine radio operators found these regulations problematic, as they did not provoke substantial complaint.

By regulating advertising and programming content, the government implicitly accepted the commercial and competitive character of Argentine radio. Although non-commercial radio stations run by provincial and municipal governments and by universities were more numerous in Argentina than in the United States, they never posed a significant challenge to the for-profit stations. Moreover, as Robert Claxton has argued, “stations survived as noncommercial entities to the extent that they behaved like their commercial counterparts.”<sup>63</sup> While these stations did broadcast educational programs, they held onto their audiences with healthy doses of popular music and other light entertainments. In contrast to the publicly financed, state-run broadcasting systems created in Europe, Argentina thus followed the United States in creating a system in which the airwaves were publicly owned but licensed primarily to private individuals or entities aiming to make a profit. With the rise of anti-liberal, statist ideologies in the 1930s, there were significant campaigns to place the radio industry under government control. The daily newspaper *La Prensa* saw the new medium as a threat to its own circulation and argued that the poor quality of radio programming required the nationalization of the broadcasting system.<sup>64</sup> By the late 1930s, the government seemed to agree. In 1938 President Roberto Ortiz appointed a Commission for the Study and Reorganization of the Radio System. Released the following year, the commission’s report found grave defects in Argentine radio, arguing that the competitive system had produced “bad programs” and turned the radio into “a true enemy of public culture.”<sup>65</sup> The report recommended the termination of all existing licenses and the expansion

of state oversight. The proposal included a 50 percent reduction in advertising and the formation of a governing board to include license owners as well as government appointees. Nevertheless, the commission's recommendations met with widespread resistance and were not implemented. Argentine radio would remain in private hands until the media takeovers of the Perón regime.

In the absence of a powerful foreign presence and an interventionist state, radio emerged as a lucrative arena for small entrepreneurs. The founders of early stations tended to be immigrants or the sons of immigrants of modest backgrounds. Lacking any advanced education, these self-taught businessmen typically invested in a radio station after having achieved success in some other sector, often radio equipment sales.<sup>66</sup> The recording industry pioneer Max Glücksmann partnered with the radio equipment dealer Benjamín Gache and the engineer Antonio Devoto to found Radio Grand Splendid in 1924.<sup>67</sup> But the most influential radio entrepreneur was Jaime Yankelevich. Like Glücksmann, Yankelevich was a Jewish immigrant whose family had come to Argentina when Jaime was a small boy. By the early 1920s, he had trained as an electrician and owned a small shop in Buenos Aires, specializing in radio equipment. In 1926, having made a substantial profit from the excitement generated by the Firpo-Dempsey fight, Yankelevich purchased Radio Nacional, one of the stations on which he had advertised his store.<sup>68</sup> By 1934, when Radio Nacional changed its name to Radio Belgrano, the station dominated the market, charging the highest advertising rates and signing the biggest stars.

Yankelevich and Glücksmann bear comparison to the Jewish immigrants who founded the major Hollywood film studios in the late 1910s. As the film historian Lary May has argued, producers like Adolph Zukor, Samuel Goldwyn, and Louis B. Mayer exemplified Max Weber's concept of the "pariah capitalist" who seizes opportunities scorned by established elites. Their outsider status and experience in marginal trades gave them the ability to tap into consumer preferences that challenged Victorian values as well as to imagine a more open and inclusive nation.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, neither Glücksmann nor Yankelevich had any previous experience in music or entertainment, but their retail background made them experts in catering to popular tastes. Glücksmann gravitated to tango because he recognized that genre's commercial potential, and he developed the tango contests to help him respond more efficiently to his audience. Similarly,

Yankelevich, as an early radio advertiser, saw the medium as a commercial opportunity, not an artistic one, and he embraced tango and other popular genres because of their widespread appeal. As entrepreneurial outsiders, Glücksmann and Yankelevich were unlikely to feel any of the ambivalence that more elite Argentines often felt toward popular cultural practices. Yankelevich in particular amazed both his detractors and his admirers with his gift for appealing to popular tastes. Pedro de Paoli, a severe critic of the lowbrow tendencies of Argentine radio, accused Radio Belgrano of favoring “vulgar programs (programas populacheros),” while another commentator denounced Yankelevich for offering a “course in bad taste.”<sup>70</sup> Describing the same tendency more positively, the magazine *Radiolandia* celebrated Radio Belgrano’s “popular orientation” and congratulated the station for embracing “the aesthetic orientations of the *pueblo*.”<sup>71</sup>

As these comments suggest, Yankelevich took a “give-the-people-what-they-want” approach to radio programming; shying away from anything too erudite, Radio Belgrano offered popular music, radio theater, comic sketches, news, and sporting events. Within a month after purchasing the station, Yankelevich had ended the practice of playing records over the air, relying instead on live performances in order to distinguish his station from the competition. This strategy was quickly imitated, establishing live music as the centerpiece of most broadcast schedules and initiating a fierce, ongoing competition to sign the most popular artists. Among Belgrano’s musical offerings, tango singers were most heavily represented. The station’s listings in 1938, for example, read like a tango who’s who: Mercedes Simone, Libertad Lamarque, Ignacio Corsini, Agustín Magaldi, Charlo, and Alberto Gómez. Folk singers like Martha de los Ríos were also featured, although much less prominently. That same year, Radio Belgrano’s program listed ten tango bands and four jazz bands under the heading of dance music as well as a handful of bands that specialized in other foreign genres.<sup>72</sup> In addition to the station’s musical offerings, Yankelevich achieved enormous popularity with other types of programming. The comic Tomás Simari created “the italo-criollo detective Nick Vermicelli” by fusing the long-standing criollista tradition of poking fun at Italian “Cocoliches,” as well as his own experience growing up with an Italian immigrant father, with the conventions of Hollywood gangster films. Simari’s sketches were so popular that thousands turned out at the Boca Juniors soccer stadium to see Vermicelli marry his love



interest, Anyulina.<sup>73</sup> But the most popular show on Yankelevich's station was *Chispazos de Tradición*, a criollista soap opera that aired daily at 6:45 in the evening. Written in discrete chapters by the Spanish playwright and poet José Andrés González Pulido and featuring folk music composed and collected by the Italian-born Félix Scolatti Almeyda, *Chispazos* was often attacked for its lack of authenticity. Nevertheless, González Pulido's melodramatic stories of gauchos and their women, or *chinas*, attracted a huge following. According to the program's weekly magazine, 114,687 fans voted in a poll to determine whom the character Juan Manuel should marry.<sup>74</sup>

Like Glücksmann, Yankelevich developed various methods for connecting to his audience. Vermicelli's wedding and the poll to pick Juan Manuel's bride were typical of a station that encouraged the active participation of its listeners. In 1937 *Sintonía* reported on a poll organized by Yankelevich, an "expert in popular psychology." Adapting Glücksmann's contests to the radio, Radio Belgrano asked listeners to select the best new tango song played on its airwaves and allegedly received 1,835,235 votes through the mail.<sup>75</sup> Regardless of the veracity of this claim, the contest promoted the station's commitment to tango as a sign of its adherence to popular tastes. The station even used this sort of contest to pick the name "Belgrano." When the Argentine government declared that the word "national" could no longer be used as part of a private business name, the station polled its listeners to select a replacement.<sup>76</sup> In addition to write-in contests, Radio Belgrano used theatrical performances to give its audience greater access to its performers. The *Chispazos de Tradición* cast performed regularly—often immediately after its radio show—in movie theaters throughout the barrios of Buenos Aires and even on tour in the interior of the country. The show was such a phenomenon that the radio fan magazine *Antena* dedicated a special letters-to-the-editor section to it, and schools throughout Argentina included *Chispazos* scripts in their theater festivals.<sup>77</sup>

Radio Belgrano's enormous success made it a trendsetter. *Chispazos de Tradición*, for example, inspired a seemingly unending list of imitators. Shows like *Junto al Fogón*, *Tradición Nacional*, *En el rancho 'e Don Montiel*, *Cenizas del Fogón*, *Juramento Gaucho*, and others all borrowed the *Chispazos* formula: episodic melodramas set in the Pampas among stereotypical gauchos and accompanied by folk songs.<sup>78</sup> Radio Belgrano's next hit was a historical romance set in the Argentine countryside during the

reign of Juan Manuel de Rosas. Written by Héctor Pedro Blomberg and Carlos Viale Paz, *Bajo la Santa Federación* shared its rural setting and its liberal use of folk music with *Chispazos*; the two shows even shared the same composer: Scolatti Almeyda. Nevertheless, *Bajo la Santa Federación* set itself apart by claiming to offer greater literary merit and historical accuracy, and it too inspired copycats on other stations, including subsequent works by Blomberg and Viale Paz, who stuck with their winning formula. Radio Belgrano's musical contests were also imitated by other stations, as was the station's mix of tango, folk, and jazz.<sup>79</sup>

By the mid-1930s, the fierce competition on Argentine radio had produced homogeneity, with virtually all stations seeking to reproduce Belgrano's success. The lack of variety and innovation on the radio was a frequent topic of editorials in entertainment magazines. One typical column blamed the "tendency toward imitation" on the single-minded pursuit of profit, which led stations to copy any popular program, an assessment shared by the official commission appointed by President Ortiz.<sup>80</sup> Similarly, Guillermo Del Ponte, the director of Radio Fénix, complained that most stations competed to sign acts that had already proven popular, ignoring their obligation to "educate the tastes of the public."<sup>81</sup> While listeners who sought out diversity could find it, a random spin of the dial would support this conventional wisdom. The radio listings for September 1933, for example, featured sports and news programs, as well as weekly programs aimed at many of Argentina's immigrant groups. There were programs for children, Hawaiian music shows, two opera performances per week, as well as seven classical orchestras performing regularly. These shows did represent diversity, but they were far outnumbered by the many daily programs that featured tango, jazz, comedy sketches, and radio plays. There were thirteen jazz bands and fourteen tango bands performing on a regular basis. In addition, some forty-one singers and duos who specialized in either tango or Argentine folk music enjoyed regular airplay, often performing as many as four or five times per week.<sup>82</sup>

Statistics compiled by Andrea Matallana reveal the ubiquity of the Yankelevich formula. In 1936 70 percent of all radio programming was dedicated to music and radio theater. Five years later, other types of programs—chiefly news—had gained some modest ground, but music and radio theater continued to account for 61 percent of the total.<sup>83</sup> And within these categories, most stations hewed close to Radio Belgrano's aesthetic preferences. In 1938 tango represented 54 percent of the music

played on porteño radio stations, while jazz was second with 19 percent. By comparison, only 6 percent of music programming was dedicated to classical music.<sup>84</sup> Stations like Radio Splendid and Radio Excelsior did attempt to distinguish themselves as highbrow alternatives to Radio Belgrano by playing a greater percentage of classical music. But advertising rates suggest that these stations had a significantly smaller audience; Belgrano's rates were twice as high as Excelsior's and up to 33 percent higher than Splendid's.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, even these stations offered a great many programs that would have fit right in on Radio Belgrano. In March 1935, Radio Splendid's Saturday schedule included several classical performances, but its nighttime lineup featured the jazz band Blue American Jazz alternating with the orquesta típica of Edgardo Donato. For its part, Radio Excelsior offered opera on Sundays, but its Saturday program featured jazz by the Santa Paula Serenaders and tango by Juan de Dios Filiberto's orquesta típica.<sup>86</sup> Tango, jazz, and radio theater were programming staples all across the dial.

Yankelevich's approach was so successful that it proved difficult to resist. In fact, the one station that emerged in the 1930s with sufficient economic backing to challenge Radio Belgrano's dominance saw no alternative but to adopt a very similar program. In 1935 Editorial Haynes, the company that owned *El Mundo*, one of the top-selling daily newspapers in Buenos Aires, launched Radio El Mundo with the intention of creating "the leading station in South America." In particular, the station bragged of its intent to improve the content of Argentine radio. Toward that end, it named as its artistic director Enrique del Ponte, one of the founders of Radio Cultura, a station long praised by critics of Radio Belgrano's vulgar populism.<sup>87</sup> In the weeks preceding the station's inauguration, *El Mundo* celebrated its artistic director as a man committed to the "constant improvement of the cultural and artistic level of the radio," a "solid guarantee of quality for the station . . . because of the vast culture and exquisite sensibility that characterizes him."<sup>88</sup> Del Ponte's inaugural transmission included a performance by the tango star Azucena Maizani, but also symphonic music by Weber and de Falla, as well as several songs by Juan Arvizú, the Mexican bolero singer. The prominence of both classical music and international artists was, in fact, intended to be a hallmark of Radio El Mundo's style.<sup>89</sup> In order to make the new station into a model of high cultural standards, del Ponte announced his plan to assemble a house orchestra as skilled in symphonic music as those that played in the presti-

gious Colón Theater in Buenos Aires.<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, within a few weeks, the station had reversed course, firing del Ponte and replacing him with the former artistic director of Radio Belgrano, Pablo Osvaldo Valle. From that moment on, Radio El Mundo employed a distinctly Yankelevich-inspired approach. Valle attempted to re-create the lineup he had assembled for Radio Belgrano, luring away popular artists whenever he could.<sup>91</sup> By emphasizing programs with mass appeal, Radio Belgrano and Radio El Mundo dominated the radio market, absorbing some 60 percent of all the advertising revenue on Argentine radio by 1939 and alarming observers who worried that without state intervention the radio would become a de facto monopoly.<sup>92</sup> Radio El Mundo's hiring of Valle and its embrace of Belgrano's programming style suggest that the critics were right: competition in the radio market did produce a trend toward uniformity.

The enormous success of Yankelevich's formula and the tendency of all local radio stations to adopt it reflected the position of Argentina in global mass cultural circuits. Just as the commercial success of the tango reflected its capacity to mediate between cosmopolitan modernity and Argentine tradition, successful radio stations struck a similar balance. Since its inception as a hobby for amateur enthusiasts, the radio apparatus itself had epitomized technological modernity.<sup>93</sup> In the 1930s, stations like Belgrano and El Mundo boasted of their technical achievements and their use of the most up-to-date equipment as much as of the excellence of their programs. Toward this end, advertisements for radio stations often featured photographs of radio towers in order to buttress their claims of technological sophistication (see figure 5). On the occasion of Radio El Mundo's inauguration, *La Canción Moderna* ran an extensive pictorial of the station's multiple studios, characterizing them as examples of "modern and comfortable elegance" and noting their use of the latest noise-reduction technology. The grand dimensions of Studio A, the magazine declared, "place it among the largest in the world."<sup>94</sup> Yet alongside these claims, radio stations also needed to deliver local authenticity. Efforts to elevate the foreign at the expense of the national were, like Enrique del Ponte's attempt at Radio El Mundo, doomed to fail. Argentine listeners appreciated the tango's ability to deliver modernity on Argentine terms; they expected the same from their radio stations.

The programming mix that dominated Argentine radio reflected these competing pressures. Radio stations prided themselves on contracting both the biggest international stars and the most popular Argentine



5 Radio advertisement, *Radiolandia*, June 18, 1938.

artists. By programming jazz as well as Brazilian, Cuban, Central American, and even Gypsy music, Radio Belgrano achieved “the modern miracle” of bringing together “all the rhythms of the world,” thereby realizing the “ideal of the twentieth century.”<sup>95</sup> The station’s inclusion of musical variety reinforced the amazing power of radio technology to bring the whole world into porteño homes. Yet amid this variety, Yankelevich was careful to give special prominence to tango. By highlighting tango alongside jazz as well as a dizzying array of other international genres, Radio Belgrano reconciled local tradition with cosmopolitan modernity. Similarly, among the soap operas listeners could find on Argentine radio in the 1930s were gacho stories modeled on *Chispazos de Tradición*, detective stories modeled on Hollywood films, and “universal” literary works from the European canon. By imitating foreign models and placing Argentine programs among a variety of North American-style options, radio offered Argentine listeners access to modernity on local terms. The success of Jaime Yankelevich’s radio station, no less than that of Glücksmann’s record label, rested on its capacity to construct an alternative modernism.

If competition yielded imitation in the radio market of Buenos Aires, the development of national networks broadcast this increasingly homog-

enous porteño mass culture to the rest of the country. Radio networks emerged in Argentina just a few years after the appearance of the networks CBS and NBC in the United States in 1927. In 1930 Yankelevich founded the first and most important Argentine network, linking the five stations he owned in Buenos Aires with stations in Rosario, Bahía Blanca, Córdoba, and Mendoza. Over the next several years, he added five other stations across the Argentine interior. By the middle of the decade, the Yankelevich network had been joined by two others: RADES, launched by the group who owned Radio Splendid, and the Blue and White Network, whose flagship was Radio El Mundo.<sup>96</sup> Affiliated stations benefited from higher advertising rates as well as access to the latest technology and the most popular artists and programs. Clearly, independent stations in the interior were at a major disadvantage, and the result was to reinforce the mass cultural dominance of Buenos Aires. Scholars have argued that the emergence of networks in the United States helped produce a trend toward standardized programming; as the number of independent stations declined, so did the incentives to specialize in programs that would appeal to niche audiences.<sup>97</sup> In Argentina, this effect was even greater. Buenos Aires had long exerted a powerful leadership role in the nation's cultural life, one that reflected the capital's overwhelming economic domination. Long before the invention of the modern mass media, singers and theater companies from Buenos Aires toured the interior, spreading porteño popular culture. Record players and radios only deepened this cultural transfer. Already in the 1920s, peasants from the remote Calchaquí valley who migrated to the Tucumán lowlands to work in the sugar harvest returned home with records, gramophones, and a taste for tango.<sup>98</sup> In the 1930s, more and more Argentines in the nation's interior were able to listen to radio, and increasingly, the radio stations they heard were affiliates of national networks based in Buenos Aires and broadcasting a predictable mix of tango, jazz, and radio theater. By the 1930s, the radio had unified the national mass cultural marketplace.

#### THE CINEMA AND AUDIENCE SEGMENTATION

Like the radio, cinema technology came early to Argentina. Little more than a year after the Lumière brothers held their first motion picture exhibition in Paris in 1895, several of their films were screened at the Odeon Theater in Buenos Aires. By 1897 Max Glücksmann and his collab-

orator, Eugenio Py, were producing their own short films for the Casa Lepage.<sup>99</sup> Over the next decade, the Argentine cinema would remain primarily an object of curiosity for porteños anxious to sample the most impressive of modern technology. Unlike the radio, the high cost of film equipment meant that the cinema never produced an extensive community of amateur producers.<sup>100</sup> Instead, the well-to-do could watch imported and locally produced newsreels and other short films at downtown theaters. Beginning in 1909, with the release of *La Revolución de Mayo*, Mario Gallo's fictional recreation of Argentina's independence movement of 1810, Argentine cinema began to emerge as a popular form of commercial entertainment. Argentine silent film boomed in the years between 1915 and 1921, when about one hundred feature films were produced. With the European film industry shuttered by the First World War, Argentine filmmakers were even able to sell their products abroad. The most successful Argentine film of the silent era, *Nobleza gaucha* (Cairo, 1915), was a hit not only in Buenos Aires but also throughout Latin America and Spain.<sup>101</sup>

Although the profitability of *Nobleza gaucha* was hardly typical of Argentine cinema in these years, its thematic content was. With intertitles drawn from José Hernández's epic poem *Martín Fierro*, the film tells the story of a brave gaucho whose girlfriend is abducted by an evil ranch owner and taken to his mansion in the city. *Nobleza gaucha* thus introduces the city versus country opposition that would appear sixteen years later in the Gardel film *Las luces de Buenos Aires* and in so many subsequent Argentine movies. This theme allows the film to revel in Argentine modernity—for example, via shots of automobile traffic on the luxurious Avenida de Mayo in Buenos Aires—even as it celebrates rural traditions as the essence of Argentine nationhood.<sup>102</sup> Just as tango's broad appeal relied on its capacity to reconcile jazz with Argentine popular culture, films like *Nobleza gaucha* offered domestic audiences an alternative modernism, a way of inserting a mythical national past into a rapidly modernizing present.<sup>103</sup> And as in the case of tango, the cinema's thematic concerns reflected the dynamics of the transnational marketplace. Unlike Argentine radio programmers, who after the decline of Radio Sudamérica faced no foreign competition, Argentine filmmakers needed to distinguish their products from the imported films available to local moviegoers, and they did so by emphasizing the national. Many followed the example of *Nobleza gaucha* by repackaging stories drawn from criollista

literature and the enormously popular criollo circus, while others narrated famous episodes from Argentine history.

Argentine silent film entered a crisis in the early 1920s. The end of the war facilitated the recovery of the European film industry, increasing the competition that Argentine movies faced abroad. More important, however, was the rise of Hollywood cinema to a position of unrivalled international dominance. Beginning in 1916, American studios adopted new strategies, opening their own offices around the world so as to avoid having to negotiate with local distribution firms. After the war, the active support of the United States government helped Hollywood studios prize open foreign markets. But more than distribution strategies or government backing, the international success of the North American film industry during the 1920s reflected the sheer size of its domestic market. With huge movie audiences at home, Hollywood films paid for themselves before they were exported. Film companies based in the United States entered foreign markets needing only to recover distribution costs, while their local competitors had to recover the costs of production as well. Moreover, huge domestic receipts meant that Hollywood studios could afford to produce longer films with more lavish production values than those produced in other countries, and these movies attracted audiences throughout the world.<sup>104</sup> As theater owners in Argentina became aware of the appeal of expensive feature films, they were increasingly willing to deal directly with North American companies, and local distribution companies began to lose control of the market.<sup>105</sup> Unlike the recording industry, in which local producers were also the exclusive agents of foreign music companies, the Argentine film industry confronted foreign producers who enjoyed direct access to the local market. By 1931 seven large North American companies directly distributed 62 percent of all films screened in Argentina. These companies used the same distribution techniques in Argentina as they did at home: they rented films to theater owners demanding a percentage of box-office receipts, and they insisted that theater owners seeking to book a popular film also accept several less profitable movies.<sup>106</sup>

Faced with Hollywood's technical and artistic competence as well as its economic power and aggressive marketing strategies, local filmmakers could not compete. As early as 1916, the United States consul found American films on the program in almost every theater in Buenos Aires.<sup>107</sup> By the early 1920s, Argentine film production had dwindled. Over the next



decade, locally produced films would account for only 10 percent of box-office receipts.<sup>108</sup> Argentine filmgoers avidly followed the exploits of Douglas Fairbanks, Rudolph Valentino, and Greta Garbo, but they were only rarely able to see an Argentine production. In 1931 in the midst of economic crisis, only four Argentine films were released; the following year, the number had dropped to two.<sup>109</sup>

The introduction of sound in movies brought with it the resurrection of Argentina's film industry. The "talkie" emerged in the United States with the release of *The Jazz Singer* (Crosland) in 1927. By 1930 Argentine filmmakers were experimenting with records as a way of producing synchronized sound in feature films. In 1933 the country's first two modern studios—Argentina Sono Film and Lumiton—were created in order to make films using optical sound technology for the domestic market. The industry took off almost immediately, growing steadily over the next decade. Local filmmakers released thirteen films in 1935, twenty-eight in 1937, forty-one in 1938, and an average of fifty films per year over the following four years. By 1937 there were nine film studios and thirty production companies in Buenos Aires.<sup>110</sup> This rapid growth came despite the fact that Hollywood continued to enjoy a significant competitive advantage over domestic producers. By 1935 Paramount, Metro, Warner, Fox, Columbia, Universal, and United Artists all had branch offices not only in Buenos Aires, but in the important provincial cities as well. In contrast to these powerful companies, Argentine film studios were tiny operations. Lacking the bargaining power of their foreign rivals, Argentine producers were unable to secure a distribution system that guaranteed them a percentage of the gross receipts. Forced to sell films to distributors on a flat fee basis and lacking any protectionist assistance from the government, they remained severely undercapitalized.<sup>111</sup> The steady growth of the domestic film industry in such adverse conditions reveals that filmmakers had tapped a powerful demand for Argentine sound films.

As in the recording and radio industries, the growth of Argentine cinema resulted from the efforts of small entrepreneurs who proved adept at catering to local tastes. Typical of these was Angel Mentasti, who founded Argentina Sono Film, perhaps the most successful of the country's film companies. An Italian immigrant who arrived in Argentina at the end of the nineteenth century, Mentasti worked as a wine distributor. At the behest of one of his clients, the director of a company that dis-

tributed foreign films, Mentasti began to carry a movie catalogue on his sales trips through the provinces. Soon thereafter, he quit the wine business and went to work full-time in film distribution. Like Max Glücksmann and Jaime Yankelevich, Mentasti was an immigrant entrepreneur of modest means, whose expertise lay not in cultural production but in sales and marketing. Just as Glücksmann had relied on men like José González Castillo, the tango lyricist who encouraged him to record Carlos Gardel, Mentasti's partner in Argentina Sono Film was Luis Moglia Barth, an Argentine-born son of a shopkeeper. Like González Castillo, Moglia Barth had extensive experience in adapting European films for the Argentine market, a process that in his case involved extensive editing and even occasionally refilming a scene, in addition to writing subtitles. With the knowledge he gained from these adaptations, Moglia Barth began to direct his own silent films. After the introduction of optical sound and the impressive commercial success of *Las luces de Buenos Aires*, Mentasti and Moglia Barth became convinced of the potential profit to be made by following the formula developed in Gardel's film: a series of tango songs performed by well-known stars, tied together by a simple narrative drawn from the recurring tropes of tango lyrics. Well versed in the challenges of film distribution, the partners approached two investors separately with the idea for the movie that would be called, simply, *¡Tango!* (Moglia Barth, 1933) and thereby raised more capital than they needed. With its next two films already financed, Argentina Sono Film entered the marketplace in a relatively strong position.<sup>112</sup>

The filmmaking style inaugurated by *¡Tango!* was heavily influenced by Hollywood. It was, after all, a Paramount film that had suggested the basic formula. And just as tango musicians adopted a 4/4 beat and occasionally imitated jazz instrumentation, Argentine filmmakers copied North American cinematic techniques. Manuel Romero, who would become the nation's most prolific director in the 1930s, was clearly influenced by his experience working on *Las luces de Buenos Aires*. Enrique T. Susini, one of the founders of Lumiton, was also present for the filming of Gardel's first full-length talkie at Paramount's studio in Joinville, outside Paris. There, he befriended John Alton, a Hungarian American cinematographer who had moved from Los Angeles to France to work with the Hollywood director Ernst Lubitsch and who now headed the camera department at Joinville. Susini, who was in the process of building the Lumiton studio, convinced the cinematographer to return with him to

Buenos Aires. There, Alton helped design the studio and served as cinematographer for *Los tres berretines*. Between 1932 and 1940, Alton remained in Argentina, where he directed the camera work and lighting on more than twenty films, chiefly for Lumiton's rival, Argentina Sono Film. The Argentine cinema's technical and artistic debt to North American film was more than simply a result of imitation; in the figure of John Alton and others, the Argentine film industry imported Hollywood expertise directly.<sup>113</sup>

Nevertheless, if Mentasti and other Argentine film producers were to wrest some share of the domestic market away from the powerful Hollywood studios, they needed to do more than replicate North American style. Although financially weak, local studios did have certain competitive advantages. Domestic filmmakers benefited from the long tradition of popular theater in Argentina, particularly the short comic plays known as *sainetes*; by providing comparable entertainment at a lower admission price, they could capture an already existing audience. Moreover, an important segment of this audience was either unable or reluctant to read the subtitles that accompanied films in English, and demands for films in Spanish were common in the entertainment press.<sup>114</sup> In the early 1930s, Hollywood companies tried to satisfy this demand by producing films spoken in Spanish, but with the important exception of Gardel's films for Paramount, they met with only limited success. With Gardel's death in 1935, Hollywood lost its one bankable Spanish-language star, and Argentine productions quickly eclipsed Spanish language films made in the United States.<sup>115</sup> Ironically, Paramount's success with Gardel showed Argentine filmmakers that they could compete with Hollywood by emphasizing their own authenticity. Argentine movies could speak to local audiences in a way that Hollywood films could not. They were set in familiar locales, and they starred actors who spoke Spanish in the local dialect and who were often recognizable to filmgoers from their previous careers in theater and radio. Moreover, these films drew their material from Argentina's popular cultural traditions. While Argentina Sono Film turned to the tango, Lumiton's *Los tres berretines* was based on the biggest hit of the previous theatrical season. The movie's use of the immigrant stereotypes that were the *sainete's* comic trademark, as well as its celebration of soccer and tango, rooted it firmly in Argentine popular culture. Of course, both the tango and the *sainete* were from Buenos Aires. Since the vast majority of Argentine films were produced in Buenos Aires and since the

barrios of the capital city constituted the biggest local market for these movies, the cinema, like the radio, reinforced the hegemony of porteño culture throughout the nation.

The tendency of these early sound movies to emphasize and celebrate the cultural practices of ordinary Argentines repeated a process that had occurred much earlier in the United States, where the emergence of nickelodeons at the turn of the century had produced a cinema that catered to a heavily working-class audience.<sup>116</sup> In order to appeal to these viewers, filmmakers in the United States appropriated and repackaged pre-existing popular entertainments, such as melodrama and burlesque, and offered movies that featured explicitly working-class characters and concerns. Moreover, in the early years of North American cinema, movie-going was an experience that reinforced social divisions. In big cities, workers went to movie theaters in their own neighborhoods and with their own ethnic and class-based communities.<sup>117</sup>

However, in the United States, the cinema soon lost its working-class character. Various campaigns emerged to clean up and moralize the movies, to purge them of scandalous elements. And from the 1920s on, Hollywood studios embarked on a new strategy, achieving enormous profits by manufacturing films that appealed to a multiclass audience. As downtown movie palaces began to replace the old neighborhood theaters, filmmakers rejected the spectacular melodrama that had been so popular among working-class audiences in the earlier period. They stopped making films about and for the working class and instead embraced more conservative “cross-class fantasies.”<sup>118</sup> More fundamentally, “classical” Hollywood cinema created a new mode of spectatorship that blurred the class and ethnic divisions of movie audiences. Beginning in the late teens, North American filmmakers used set design, composition, continuity editing, deep focus, and other techniques in order to produce seamless narratives in which the spectator was granted an omniscience denied to the film’s characters. By actively positioning spectators, these new strategies of narration encouraged viewers’ absorption and identification with the film, and, in so doing, they tended to standardize reception. While viewers still brought their own perspectives to bear on films, this new cinematic style facilitated Hollywood’s efforts to pitch its products at a homogenous mass audience.<sup>119</sup>

Many of the same ideological and commercial forces that worked to dissolve the cinema’s working-class commitments in the United States

were present in Argentina as well. Alarmed by the power of movies to shape the “culture” of the masses as well as the image of Argentina abroad, many intellectuals and politicians urged the cinema to raise its standards. These critics echoed those who attacked radio stations for pandering to the lowbrow tastes of the masses, and they proposed the same solution: state intervention. Particularly vocal in their demands for official regulation of the film industry were Carlos Alberto Pessano, the Catholic intellectual and editor of the film magazine *Cinegraf*, and Matías Sánchez Sorondo, the conservative senator. These cultural critics linked their campaign to the demands of filmmakers who wanted the government to protect the local film industry against foreign competition. In 1936 President Agustín P. Justo created the Argentine Cinematic Institute and appointed Pessano and Sánchez Sorondo as its directors. Nevertheless, under Ortiz’s administration, the institute’s functions were severely limited, and although some instances of censorship did occur during the 1930s, these were relatively minor.<sup>120</sup> But while official censorship remained limited in these years, criticism of the supposed bad taste displayed in national films was nearly omnipresent in the print media. In *Crítica*, Ulyses Petit de Murat denounced “certain dishes seasoned with coarse sauces, certain situations that affect good taste, the stylistic rudeness of many films.”<sup>121</sup> Likewise, in *El Mundo*, the film reviewer Calki (Raimundo Calcagno) insisted, “our cinema needs quality!”<sup>122</sup> while his colleague Néstor (Miguel Paulino Tato) irritated movie fans by fulminating against the “vulgarity and bad taste” displayed in local films.<sup>123</sup>

For these critics, what threatened the quality of Argentine cinema was precisely its tendency to borrow from lowbrow popular cultural forms such as the tango and the sainete. In its review of *Los tres berretines*, *Cinegraf* put it succinctly: “We have repudiated a cinema based on specimens from the *suburbios*, on carnival parade peasants. It seems to us equally absurd that films are falsified based on *sainete* immigrants in order to lapse into situations that can never adequately reflect national life and that films resort to humor through the language of the *arrabales*, which is inherently in bad taste.”<sup>124</sup> “Bad taste,” according to this reviewer, was epitomized by the tango and the sainete, cultural forms that sprang from the *suburbios* and *arrabales* that were home to the urban poor. While *Cinegraf*’s conservative politics and glossy covers stood out among Argentine film magazines, its elitist hostility toward popular culture did not. Most film reviewers were ambivalent at best about the local

cinema's appropriation of lowbrow cultural forms.<sup>125</sup> They wanted Argentine films to emphasize the national without at the same time catering to the uncultured tastes of the popular sectors. In its positive review of *La vida de Carlos Gardel* (de Zavalía, 1939), a biography filmed four years after Gardel's death, *La Razón* lauded the film for having avoided "the sin of reproducing the hackneyed and unedifying world of the tango (*ambiente tanguero*). In effect, Carlos Gardel rose in the suburban barrios, singing in the markets, as the film says. But the film has not gone poking around in that dirty atmosphere of the bar counter and the suburban tough (*compadrito suburbano*)."<sup>126</sup> Even though this reviewer acknowledged the rags-to-riches story that helped make Gardel a national icon, he complimented the film for avoiding any depiction of the gritty urban milieu from which Gardel emerged. What the reviewer appreciated was the movie's sanitized version of a popular national legend. Critics like this one hoped that film, if it could avoid pandering to popular tastes, might serve as a vehicle for educating and improving the masses. They saw the cinema as an opportunity to redefine the nation by aligning it with progress and modernity while preserving its distinctive essence.

High-minded critics were hardly the only influence encouraging filmmakers to raise their standards. Competition with Hollywood gave Argentine filmmakers a chronic case of nationalist insecurity. Before the boom in domestic film production, the cinema was often figured as a dangerously seductive threat to the nation; foreign movie stars threatened to woo local girls away from Argentine men. In a column in 1931, Roberto Arlt worried that women who watched movies would become disillusioned with their own lives. He reports the words of a female informant, referring to a Hollywood film star popular in the Spanish-speaking world: "I have known many happily married women who after going to the movies for one year, look at their husbands as if to say: 'Ramón Novarro smokes more elegantly than you.'"<sup>127</sup> Likewise, in *Los tres berretines*, the patriarch of the family complains that when women return from the movies, their lives seem "miserable" by contrast. Once Argentina began producing its own sound films, the competition with Hollywood was often depicted as a matter of national importance. The fan magazine *Sintonía* regularly ran ads calling on patriotic readers to attend Argentine films: "Watch Argentine movies in your barrio theater: It is patriotic (*Es hacer patria*)."<sup>128</sup> Eventually, the success of the local film industry gave Argentine men the chance to undo their emasculation. In

1939 the film and radio magazine *Radiolandia* actually celebrated the suicide of a girl from the province of Misiones, whose desperation was caused by the recent death of the local film star José Gola. The fact that Argentine girls were killing themselves for national idols as they had once done for Rudolph Valentino represented a major victory: “Native competition (*la competencia criolla*) has become great and strong.”<sup>129</sup> In this atmosphere of national anxiety, movie critics used each review of an Argentine film as an occasion to measure the progress of the nation’s film industry against the Hollywood standard. As one positive review put it, “The eyes of the spectator, accustomed to the brilliance, elegance and movement of foreign cinematic productions, will not much miss those virtues watching this film from local studios. And these days, any Argentine production that places itself on that level of spectacle, which has cost the foreigner so many years of work and so many millions, deserves frank applause.”<sup>130</sup> The transnational marketplace itself gave the domestic studios an incentive to refine and elevate their films.

Just as competition with jazz led musicians and radio programmers to stress tango’s modernity, filmmakers facing competition from Hollywood responded by embracing the modern. In the silent era, *Nobleza gaucha* had demonstrated that Argentine movies could succeed by offering viewers both modern Buenos Aires and the rural traditions of the gauchos. The sound films of the 1930s deployed similar strategies to construct an alternative modernism. If films like *¡Tango!* and *Los tres berretines* celebrated Argentine popular culture, they also reveled in porteño modernity. The opening montage of *Los tres berretines*, in which images of congested city streets are accompanied by jazz music, is a case in point. Likewise, as Florencia Garramuño has pointed out, among the first images of *¡Tango!* is the bridge over the Riachuelo River in the busy port of Buenos Aires, an image that signifies both the industrial modernity of the port and the picturesque flavor of La Boca, the working-class portside neighborhood. The poster for Argentina Sono Film’s third feature, *Riachuelo* (Moglia Barth, 1934), used the same bridge as a backdrop, along with bustling ship traffic in the port to represent the city’s thriving commerce.<sup>131</sup> These images served much the same purpose as radio station advertisements featuring photographs of giant antennas: they associated local mass cultural productions with the latest achievements in modern technology.

The Argentine studios had good reasons to abandon their commitment to lowbrow popular culture, just as Hollywood had done in the

1920s. Not only did critics demand moral and artistic improvement, but also local audiences accustomed to North American cinematic virtuosity expected a more modern cinema. By 1933, when the local film industry finally took off, Hollywood had long since rejected its own working-class origins in favor of a more cross-class mode of address. By continuing to produce cinema rooted in popular culture, Argentine filmmakers risked seeming antiquated to audiences who were used to the Hollywood style. Yet at the same time, other forces discouraged the local studios from following Hollywood's lead. Most important, the Argentine movie audience was segmented in ways that made it difficult to embrace Hollywood's pursuit of a homogenous, multiclass audience. Unlike the radio, movies were consumed in public places and therefore lent themselves more readily to attempts at distinction. In Buenos Aires, a preference for foreign films became a marker of upper-class status. The resulting audience segmentation reinforced domestic filmmakers' embrace of plebeian cultural practices.

From the beginning of the sound era, the movies were a popular source of entertainment in Argentine cities. As early as 1929, there were 972 theaters showing movies in the country as a whole, 152 of them in the city of Buenos Aires.<sup>132</sup> Seven years later, Argentina ranked first in Latin America with 1,425 movie theaters.<sup>133</sup> On the basis of film receipts for 1942, the U.S. Commerce Department calculated that the average Argentine went to the movies seven or eight times per year.<sup>134</sup> Many of these moviegoers belonged to the ranks of the working poor. Of the 147 theaters listed on one porteño newspaper's movie page in 1939, 101 were located in the barrios outside the city center,<sup>135</sup> and as early as 1930, even predominately working-class areas like Nueva Pompeya and La Boca had their own movie theaters.<sup>136</sup> Admission prices were high at the downtown, first-run theaters: 1.50 pesos for the balcony and 2.50 for orchestra seats. But barrio movie houses were much more accessible to popular audiences. There, tickets went for as little as 20 centavos, or the equivalent of U.S. \$0.05, at a time when the average daily wage for an unskilled worker was between U.S. \$1.00 and U.S. \$2.00. And for that relatively low price, patrons at barrio theaters were entitled to a program that consisted of at least three and as many as five feature films.<sup>137</sup> The lack of ethnic segregation in Buenos Aires meant that moviegoing never reinforced immigrant identities the way the nickelodeons did in North American cities. On the other hand, Argentine movie audiences continued to be at



least partly segregated by class throughout the 1930s, long after the neighborhood theaters of the United States had given way to the downtown movie palaces. In the barrios of Buenos Aires, the movies were a cheap night out, affordable even for manual laborers. The weekly magazine of Argentina's principal union confederation, the CGT, probably only exaggerated slightly when it declared that "90% of the clientele for the production of films comes from among our readers."<sup>138</sup>

No doubt the working-class members of the CGT enjoyed all sorts of movies, but they made up a particularly large segment of the audience for domestic films. Throughout the period, the Argentine movie audience was divided roughly along class lines: while Argentines of all social classes saw Hollywood films, the audience for domestic movies was composed primarily of the lower and middle classes. As the U.S. Commerce Department put it, "The so-called better class Argentine . . . has a predilection for American films."<sup>139</sup> In fact, for much of the 1930s, many downtown, first-run theaters refused to show Argentine films at all, and the film industry trade paper, *El Heraldo del Cinematografista*, labeled most domestic productions "suitable, especially, for popular theaters."<sup>140</sup> According to the movie page from 1939 cited above, only 30 percent of the downtown theaters were showing any Argentine films. But in the barrio theaters, the figure rose to 53 percent, and most of those theaters offered several domestic productions.<sup>141</sup> If we were to exclude such well-to-do districts as Norte, where only one of seven theaters was showing a domestic film, the proportion would be substantially higher. The movies constituted a cultural field marked by a hierarchy of taste. At the top of this hierarchy were the major new Hollywood films, shown for a high price at fancy downtown theaters. At the other end of the spectrum were Argentine films, shown at barrio theaters at prices accessible to nearly all. As we have seen, the barrios of Buenos Aires housed a heterogeneous population of diverse class commitments. Yet within the market for cinema, the barrios represented the "popular" in contrast to the elite world downtown.

Argentina Sono Film and Lumiton initially acquiesced to this audience segmentation because they lacked the big budgets that would have enabled them to challenge Hollywood's control of the high-end market. Eventually, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, the studios did pursue wealthier consumers, appropriating storylines from North American films in order to attract these audiences. But at the same time, local

filmmakers needed to hold on to their base audience in the barrios. Even at low-cost barrio theaters, moviegoers had a choice between films from the United States and local productions, and Argentine movies that simply copied North American models risked appearing second best by comparison. Just as the innovations of tango modernizer Julio de Caro were measured against the achievements of Paul Whiteman, Argentina's cinematic efforts would always be judged by Hollywood standards. Given the enormous disparity in budgets, the playing field was anything but level. In response, local studios continued to play to their comparative advantage, producing films rooted in Argentine popular culture in order to appeal to the humble viewers who made up the bulk of their audience.

Moreover, popular culture, and particularly tango, helped domestic filmmakers expand their audience beyond the country's borders. Thanks in large part to the international star power of Gardel, itself a product of the North American film industry, tango had major commercial appeal throughout Latin America. After Gardel, the biggest beneficiary of this demand was Libertad Lamarque, whose tango films became major hits both inside and outside of Argentina, making her the nation's biggest and highest-paid box-office attraction. Lamarque, already a star on the radio, had a singing role in *¡Tango!* and went on to star in a series of film melodramas that allowed her to show off both her singing voice and her screen appeal. Her films were international hits and paved the way for other Argentine productions, allowing Argentina's studios to dominate the Latin American market until they were overtaken by the Mexican film industry in the mid-1940s.<sup>142</sup> Foreign demand for Argentine tango thus reinforced the young film industry's embrace of popular culture and its commitment to the aesthetic preferences of a popular audience.

The transnational marketplace pushed the Argentine cinema in two directions at once. Effective competition required filmmakers to emulate Hollywood as well as to distinguish their products by delivering the Argentine particularities that audiences could not get in Hollywood movies. The resulting cinema, built out of a combination of elements drawn from Hollywood and from Argentine popular culture, offered an alternative modernism that reconciled Argentine tradition with cosmopolitan modernity. But as in the recording and radio industries, this reconciliation was always unstable. The Argentine cinema's subordinate relationship to the North American film industry prevented it from fully embracing Hollywood's strategy of building a homogenous mass audience. Argen-

tine producers found it extremely difficult to make films that could satisfy both the elite customers who preferred foreign films and the barrio crowds that made up the bulk of their audience. Just as tango music maintained its identification with the humble masses and Radio Belgrano boasted of its fealty to the tastes of the pueblo, the Argentine cinema retained a commitment to plebeian popular culture that limited its efforts to emulate Hollywood modernity. As the chapters that follow will make clear, the persistent tensions between modernity and tradition, between the cosmopolitan and the authentic, and between efforts at cultural elevation and the embrace of the popular shaped virtually all Argentine mass culture in this period.

For Argentina's heterogeneous audiences, mass culture had brought the whole world closer, but it put them into particularly close contact with the output of the powerful culture industries in the United States. Jazz and Hollywood were "global vernaculars," in Hansen's phrase, discourses that facilitated an everyday engagement with modernity. When Argentines consumed locally produced music and film, they did so as part of a mass cultural diet that contained hefty servings of these hegemonic modernisms. Jazz always accompanied the tango on porteño radio stations, and North American films always outnumbered Argentine movies in local theaters.<sup>143</sup> But unlike imported cultural products, tango music and domestic movies purported to tell these audiences something about themselves. The pressures of the transnational marketplace helped produce a deeply contradictory discourse about Argentine national identity, as cultural producers reshaped pre-existing popular cultural traditions in order to compete against foreign imports. No tradition was more important in this process than popular melodrama.