

Flamenco

FLAMENCO ROOTS

If one were asked "What is the essential spirit of Spain?", probably most would readily answer "Flamenco" or perhaps "Bullfighting". Indeed the Granada-born poet and writer, Garcia Lorca, claimed that Flamenco is "deeply related to bullfighting, not only sharing root emotions and passions, flashes of erratic genius, but because both are possible ways to break out of social and economic marginality."

In fact, Flamenco belongs to the south of Spain, to Andalucia, and while its history is obscure and disputed, its origins were contemporary with the Moorish era. Its sources were probably related to the waves of immigrants in this period: from Morocco, Egypt, Greece, and the Middle East. Jews in the Spanish Netherlands may well have had an influence; indeed one (unlikely) theory is that the word flamenco is synonymous with Flanders. In the 15th century, with the re-Christianisation of Spain, the Catholic Church marginalized many of these immigrant communities, and the arrival of gypsies (gitanos) from India at about the same time perhaps became a focus for these deprived sections of society. However, arguably, there is no such thing as "gypsy music"; there is "gypsy musicality"; where ever they end up and settle, they take the local music and make their own versions of it.

In the following centuries it fused with elements of Arab and Jewish music in the Andalucia mountains where those sections of society took refuge to escape forced religious conversions. Today it is often thought to be a gypsy art, but there are in fact two strains: gitano and payo (non-gypsy). What is apparent, is that the roots of its expression are essentially without religion, or more specifically non-Catholic, and in a culture of deprivation - "life must be lived for the day, with a passionate need to preserve self-esteem"; and "without a God, death must be faced with intense courage, pride, dignity and humour". This attitude to life and death must have engendered an intense feeling of community, and the developing flamenco music its deepest expression.

It is ironic, therefore that its characteristics may well have been most heavily influenced by the early Church in Spain with its adoption of Byzantine ecclesiastical music. The Spanish classical composer, Manuel de Falla, argued in his writings on "Cante Jondo" that this was the decisive historic event in flamenco's development. It is suggested that this influence led to the general use of the "Phrygian Mode" in flamenco. (simply put, this is the scale based on the musical note "E" rather than the typical western scales, Major - based on C and Minor - based on A, and that gives it its characteristic oriental, plaintive melancholy sound). Spanish Classical music has also been strongly influenced by Flamenco - in works by composers such as de Falla, Albeniz, Rodrigo, Tarrega and Granados, the connection is clear.

Earliest Flamenco seems to have been purely vocal (Cante), accompanied only by rhythmical hand clapping (Toque de Palmas). Only during its "golden age" in the 19th century was the guitar introduced, and its full expression in Cante the song, Baile the dance, and Guitarra or Toque the guitar accompaniment came about. At this time, the main centres were the Barrio Triana in Seville, Moron de la Frontera, Cadiz, and Jerez and later in Granada. Performances usually took place in "Peñas" or "Café Cantantes".

Castanets or Palillos were traditionally used with the regional dances, in particular Sevillanas, Fandangos de Huelva, and Tanguillo de Cadiz, and came into more general use in the mid-20th century, when perhaps a less "earthy" and more "sanitised, kitsch and politically acceptable" form of the music was fostered in Franco's era. Their use is frowned on today in the more serious dances, since they detract from the use of the hands; they are used primarily if no singer is available to interpret the Cante.

ELEMENTS OF FLAMENCO

The Guitar (Guitarra or Toque)

The basic element of rhythm in Flamenco is called the "Compas" - a recurring pattern of accented beats that gives it a regular pulse, repeated again and again like a heartbeat and it is the guitarist who strictly maintains this in a performance. It is the deepest understanding of the Compas, and the physical identification with the rhythm that brings the performance to life. The different forms are called Toques - Soleares, Seguiriyas, Tientos, Fandangos and so on. Some are folk influenced e.g. Sevillanas, Peteneras; others are regionally based e.g. Malagueñas, Granadinas. Some of the names describe the mood e.g. "Soleares" - "solitude or loneliness" or "Alegrías" - "joy or gaiety". These are not single musical pieces, but are forms on which the guitarist and singer improvise. The guitarist accompanies the singer in a close understanding of the mood and at various times extemporizes "falsetas" or short variations.

The two guitar techniques that all will recognise as flamenco are the "rasgueado", or long backward strike with all fingers across all the strings and "tremolo" which is the rapid plucking of a single string by each finger in succession. Virtuosos can reach extraordinary speeds of tremolo - at least fifteen notes per second. While the guitar seems to have come late to flamenco, and then at first only as accompaniment, it is now recognised as a powerful solo instrumental form in its own right. Early solo performers were Ramon Montoya, Andrés Segovia initially in Granada (but who later became more famous for classical guitar) and Niño Ricardo. Currently the best-known players internationally are Paco Peña, Paco de Lucia and Juan Martin.

The Song (Cante)

Urged into mood by "jaleo", or palmas hand clapping, and often with a harsh sounding voice, flamenco singers express great emotion, pain and melancholy. Together with facial expressions of anger and desperation and expressive body movements, the singer occasionally achieves "duende" - a total emotional connection with their audience, which even when expressing happiness can create a profound effect. One of the greats of the century, accompanied by Montoya, was Antonio Chacon, and in more recent times, the distinctive cracking voiced, intense El

Camaron de la Isla.

The Dance (Baile)

As opposed to the popular 'Sevillanas' folk dancing, real flamenco dancing can express all the high emotion that the singer or guitarist can evoke. Through interaction with the guitarist, the dancer improvises with huge physical and emotional control and extraordinary footwork expressed in heel to toe movements. Traditionally, women dress in the characteristic red polka-dot Sevillana dresses, while male dancers wear high waisted black trousers and waistcoats.

The Audience

An essential component of the performance is the connection with and the reaction of the audience. The total emotional connection and appreciation will be expressed with hand clapping, and calls such as 'Olé!', 'Eso Es!' or 'Asi se toca! Toca bien o toca en el campo!' is reserved for familiar surroundings – 'Play well or play in the fields!'

MODERN FLAMENCO – NUEVO FLAMENCO

After a fairly uninspired period under Franco, Flamenco has enjoyed a resurgence, starting in the late '70s with Pace Peña and perhaps more significantly the 'payo', Paco de Lucia, born in Algeciras. He, less constrained by tradition, has fused his music with jazz, Latin American and rock. More recent are groups such as the (French) Gypsy Kings – mixing with rumba, and Ketama and Radio Tarifa – mixing with North African and other world roots.

There are numerous other comparatively unknown performers, and CD recordings that are only available locally are commonplace in street markets.

WHERE TO FIND FLAMENCO

Flamenco is fairly easy to find in Granada. Granada city is the best place to plan to see it - where it is played frequently, but much in the Sacramonto, the gitano district, is pretty bad and geared to tourists. In the Albaicin district below the Alhambra there are good places to go for aficionados –

El Niño de los Almendras -'unforgettable flamenco when it happens'; Peña Plateria – 'come in small groups and speak Spanish';

There are annual flamenco festivals in the bigger cities – information is available on the Internet. Sometimes you may notice flyposters for a forthcoming performance almost anywhere in the province, and some restaurants at coastal resorts in the summer months will have players. Sometimes it will be performed at village or town fiestas. But perhaps the most unforgettable way is to come across it unexpectedly, or by word of mouth, - usually late at night and into the early hours, played impromptu by unknown performers at some insignificant bar or cafe – but - when 'duende' might just happen.

Further references and discography:

'El Arte Flamenco de la Guitarra' – Guitar Method by Juan Martin

'Flamenco Guitar' – Paco Peña – double CD

'An Introduction to Flamenco' – Charles Keyser

'Flamenco' – Jan Fairley

'Andalusia' – The Rough Guide'

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