

# Flamenco workshop

Ian Davies

"Flamenco: Fabric Woven from Toque, Baile, Cante and Palmas"



It goes without saying that anyone wishing to study Flamenco, away from Spain, is at a tremendous disadvantage. "Study" is really the wrong word, as it's not something you can learn academically from home, books or even a teacher, although these can of course help you along the right lines. Yes, of course you can learn the notes and practise the technique, but this alone does not lead you to being a good Flamenco performer.

The first problem one encounters is the lack of material in the form of dots on paper, and even when this is obtained, it tends to be a rather simplified version of what you may have heard on record under the same title. In the recording, often can be heard a quantity of extra "sympathetic" notes that are impractical to get onto paper and even if they were, would make reading unacceptably complicated. The reason for this is that all these "filling-in notes" are added by the player in such a way as to be comfortable to him with his own personalised technique, thrown in as they fall naturally under the hand. Because of this freedom, players begin to form their own particular "stamp" and with the fast accurate fingers of the flamenco players of today, this creates a problem for the student. The older style, in particular that of Sabicas I think is worth pointing out as being the least complicated in this respect, where it is possible to "lift" solos, note perfect either from dots or record (always best to use a combination of the two, or if not, preference definitely to the record) but with this hurdle over, the next is that of playing the notes with as much flavour as the man himself. O.K. it is possible to get a Paco de Lucía or Serranito solo note perfect, I've seen it done by the Japanese, even to copying expression, and the mistakes, but that doesn't make them a flamenco guitarist; a guitarist maybe, but not a flamenco, and this is where the difficulty lies.

It is not necessary to copy every individual note, it's the general flavour of *Aire* that's important. You would be amazed how few of even the top professional flamenco players in Spain are capable of learning one *falseta* perfectly. If it doesn't feel comfortable to their hand, they'll change the notes so that it does! Which is fine if they are going to play it alone but causes havoc if playing together or in two part arrangements. Nevertheless, there are young players now that are injecting elements of musicality and a sort of intelligence into their compositions and this sophistication has become necessary to be regarded as an above average soloist. Obvious examples are in the work of Paco de Lucía bringing in traces of jazz and Serranito for his quality of tone, harmony and general refinement normally associated with the classical guitar. It's a wonder how they've managed to get away with it! To have their styles accepted as being "Flamenco" by the remaining population of professional flamenco artistes. The answer is in their backgrounds. Both, in their earlier years have proved themselves beyond doubt to be outstanding in the traditional style, as soloists and also as accompanists of song and dance. Their roots are strong and deep as is their understanding of the three elements that make up the art: guitar, song and dance. (A fourth would be the hand-clapping called *Palmas*). Because of this, whatever they compose retains its authenticity as flamenco, built-in naturally due to their initial training as accompanists. Serranito and Manolo Sanlúcar to name but two, are *Tablao* trained whilst Paco de Lucía worked more in the Ballet company atmosphere, for instance, with the José Greco Company where he played with Ricardo Modrego and with whom he recorded an amount of work for two flamenco

guitars. The fact is that all have been totally immersed in the art form from a very early age either by profession or family connections.

So much for the aforementioned and others that have progressed from being accompanists to specialising as soloists. However, the vast majority do not make that move even though they may possess the technical capabilities and of course they are no less "flamenco" for it; in fact they are more in a way because they remain totally restricted by the traditional rules. To accompany the dance (*Baile*), the guitarist's rôle is secondary, to follow and enhance, not to show off intricate *falsetas* and fingerwork, more of a rhythmical than melodic back-up. Good reflexes are needed to sense speed variations and attention must be paid to give the dancer the expression that he or she requires at each moment. The same dance can vary from one performance to the next at the dancer's will, so the guitarist must be alert and able to improvise. Inspiration plays a great part under these circumstances. One day the guitarist may, on the spur of the moment, decide to change or throw in a few extra *falsetas* with no prior warning if it feels right at the time, and this should not disturb the dancer the slightest. In fact it's this freedom that allows one performer's inspiration to become contagious in a way known well in the Jazz idiom and should be existent between ensemble players of any form of music, at least expression-wise. This is the unique feature of live music compared with a recording which is identical every time you hear it. Many people criticize the *Tablao* specially the *Cuadro* for what they see as a group of performers (professional and paid) churning out the same material night after night and looking so obviously bored to bits. Of course they are often bored to bits (that does not mean that I agree that they should show it so openly) but they all know what to do *when* they want to and occasionally something clicks, inspiration spreads like fire and possibly the best real flamenco I have seen has been in the *Tablao's Cuadro*.

It is true that "Cuadro" girls are often not so much dancers as they are *flamencas* which is much more important as whatever they do must be totally authentic and correct knowing the flamenco idiom inside-out, which gives them the confidence to get up and lead the guitarists, singers and *palmeros*. Their dance is so secure as to be art in its own right even if unaccompanied, not needing guitars and *palmas* to hold it together, and it is in this area where the line is drawn between the accomplished professional in Spain, and the rest. I have found in this country for instance, that prior to a performance, dancers need to brief their guitarists and singers during a rehearsal, asking for this, that and the other, *where* to include a *falseta*, *when* the singer should start etc., whereas in Spain this is not necessary. The explanation is that all the relevant information should be within the dance itself, clearly executed to make it obvious to all others. The only time that a dancer comes down from a commanding position is when after giving the subtle sign for the singer's verse to commence, the *Cante* has preference and freedom of expression whilst the dancer retreats into virtual accompaniment, now involving by necessity the skill of improvisation and of course a very good knowledge of the *Cante*.

As can be seen, flamenco is made of a fabric woven from *toque*, *baile*, *cante* and *palmas*, where each element is strong enough to stand up for itself and at the same time be in complete harmony with the others. That is why dancers need

an understanding of the art of guitar and song; the singers an understanding of guitar and dance; and the guitarist of song and dance. Only quite recently one of our local flamenco dancers commented to me that she couldn't understand why to be a guitar soloist this was necessary. The reason is that the solos have grown up from accompaniments which form the whole basis of both composition and expression.

Another comment I have heard here was the belief that the guitarist's task of song accompaniment is simpler than that of dance accompaniment or solo playing. This is quite untrue. A great deal of experience is needed to follow the *Cante*, specially as it varies so much between singers, so there is no accustoming oneself to one singer and that being of much use for another. Only comfortable with *many* do the common guidelines become apparent and that of course takes quite a time working with *Cantaores* that at least all sing in *Compas*. It takes long enough just to be *aware* of the *compas* in the *cante* which binds the guitarist to the singer. The guitarist has to pick it up and then throw it back with *Aire* whilst at the same time giving all the correct chords with varying degrees of emphasis, remaining at all times faithful to the strictest of traditions. When the *cante* is performed without dance or *palmas*, the guitarist has nothing to grip *but* the *compas* in the *Cante*. I remember from my own experience the day whilst along accompanying a *Seguriya*; for the first time noticing the small variations in tempo: it was as if the last handful of pieces left from a jigsaw puzzle, had of their own accord fallen into place. It is only from this stage that one can *begin* to understand and appreciate the *cante*. The lyrics themselves, which mainly have been handed down over generations, I would say are of secondary importance to the rhythmic and expressive qualities that draw a parallel with American blues. In fact, flamenco song *is* blues in essence (and not all bluesmen are black in the same way as not all flamencos are gypsy), it's the crude untrained form of vocal expression that bears such a close resemblance. Anyone wishing to find an intellectual or

mystical content in the art, and some do, even asserting their views (as self-acclaimed authorities on the subject) are only misleading others due to their own lack of comprehension.


The essence of flamenco can be found all over the world in different languages: in American blues, classical Indian music, Arabic music, etc. . The flamencos of Spain recognise it, and are moved by it to the extent of shouting *Óle*. The only valid authorities on the art are the artistes themselves (there are very few exceptions) and the better the artistes, the more they know, but of course they don't need to talk about it, they just *do* it. When the special "something" clicks, the artistes perform for their own pleasure and any audience that may be present is totally disregarded; contrary to the belief of some that flamenco is intended to involve the audience in any way, they act simply as witness. Some *aficionados* may call that special "something" "duende", but I assure you that no Flamencos in Spain have anything to do with, not want to hear about ghosts. It is a term only used by aficionados (and flamencologists who ought to know better).

For the guitarist with an interest in flamenco a lot depends on how serious and to what level he wants to take his playing. Some may be content by copying parrot-fashion a favourite piece from a record but it would have to be a very good copy to be of any value however superficial. Even though their technique may allow them to achieve this, they will not become a "flamenco guitarist" for it. The technique is not needed; the character and knowledge *is*. An example comes to mind of one of the top men in the business who plays his arpeggios *pmmi*. There is a danger for the flamenco student, especially if he or she already plays the classical guitar well, to focus attention only on the sophisticated solos of today and to ignore the roots!

I strongly advise that at least fifty per cent of study time be dedicated to the imitation of much simpler material taken from accompaniments, the main source being recordings from which you can gather bits and pieces and hopefully use them yourself to accompany dancers and singers. I think that more satisfaction can be derived by playing a simple *falseta* with taste and understanding than by a whole solo with its subtleties overlooked for the sake of technique. In my next articles I will deal with a selection of *toques* in detail and by keeping the number of notes used down to a bare minimum, try to let the flamenco shine through. A *bailaora* need only use her arms, a *cantaor* to sing "Ay" for the quality of the art to be felt: A flamenco guitarist need not be a musician.

# ANDRÉS SEGOVIA

AN APPRECIATION BY GEORGE CLINTON



Mr. Clinton has had the kindness to collect in this splendid volume opinions, facts, and anecdotes about my art and personality, together with many accurate pictures of my wife, my little son, and myself, provided by a camera obedient to the skill and good taste of its master.

I regret keenly that the feverish artistic and social activity to which I have had to devote myself during the present concert season in this well-loved country has taken up the hours I could have spent reading such a variety of writers as appear in these pages, a pleasure I am saving until the book's appearance in the near future.

Let me extend the gratitude, which the generous labour of compilation of Mr. Clinton inspires in me, to all who have responded in a positive manner to his solicitation, that is to those who yesterday attended my classes and are now renowned masters, and to my friends, near and far.

I end this little note with a prediction of the warm welcome with which the public, beyond any doubt, will reward the notable efforts of the author of this work.


Andrés Segovia  
London, 1977

Essential reading for all who are interested in the art of Segovia. The Maestro's technique, his glorious sound, his musicianship, and his teaching, are discussed in detail by Julien Bream, John Williams, Alino Diaz, Alice Artzt, John Duarte and others. In addition there are interviews with Segovia in which he talks about his life, his music, and his composer colleagues. The whole — a veritable symposium — providing a valuable assessment of the greatness that is Segovia. The book is illustrated with over 70 beautiful photographs.


ISBN 0 86175 035 7

**£5.95 inc. P/P**

Cheques/PO's should be crossed and made payable to Musical New Services Ltd., Guitar House, Bimport, Shaftesbury, Dorset.  
Overseas readers please add 40p and make payment by a Bankers Draft or international Money Order in sterling.



THE WORLD'S LEADING GUITAR PUBLISHING SPECIALISTS



MUSICAL NEW SERVICES LTD

## FLAMENCO GUITAR

Very long list of  
**ACCURATE TRANSCRIPTIONS**  
(from Paco de Lucía to Sabicas)

Alain Faucher, 26-28 Rue de la Reine Blanche,  
75013 Paris, France.

## FOR SALE

### SPANISH GUITAR CENTRE, LONDON

Offers are invited from those with sufficient capital, expertise and drive who would be interested in taking over this world-famous and prestigious business. The "Centre" was founded by John Williams' father in 1952. I have run it very successfully since 1968, but I am now finding that other commitments are making it difficult for me to continue to devote the time and care that the Centre clearly deserves and needs for its future development.

**ALAN D. GUBBAY**