

Flamenco workshop

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It was my intention after last month dealing with the soleá, to go on to alegrías, but I have recently returned from my holidays in Spain and think it would be interesting to comment on my findings there.

The prime reason for my journey is (like many other typical British holiday makers) to sit on a beach for a couple of weeks and do absolutely nothing, but I always spend a week in Madrid after that to see friends, etc.

On the day subsequent to my arrival, I was at breakfast time scanning the wavelengths of my radio to find a flamenco programme which was a regular broadcast, six days per week between seven and ten in the morning: it seems like a ridiculous time of day for flamenco, but I suppose it is pushed into that spot as it is technically of minority interest: nevertheless I was surprised to find so much regular air time given to the subject, although it was a local station of Málaga within the flamencoland of Andalucía. Their time would be used to play back recordings made live at the large flamenco festivals which are presented by local councils, as well as the smaller events promoted by the *Peñas Flamencas* (a sort of club for enthusiasts); also interviews with artistes and a selection of tracks from records, often interesting old ones. One must remember that the bulk of interest is directed towards the singing, whereas out of Spain it tends to be pushed into the background!

The quality of the *Festivales de Cante* tends to be high with only the big names engaged, but unfortunately the same (or very similar) selection of singers seem to perform in all the festivals around Andalucía, excluding many others well worthy of a place. (I know this has a lot to do with being friendly with the right person). This is even more so in the case of the accompanying guitarists, there are possibly only three or four that do all the work.

One point that is worth taking into consideration is that, politically, Spain in the last couple of years has been divided into autonomous regions, so in respect of flamenco, when Andalucía needs artistes, they are taken from their own residents (to a greater extent than before), but one uncomfoting comment I have heard is that when Madrid wants flamenco they have been known to ring Seville!

On a smaller scale than that of the council-sponsored events, the "Peñas" organise their shows. Many towns, even villages, have their own clubs where *aficionados* can meet and often provide their own entertainment. It was during one of the radio programmes that I heard that the *Peña Flamenca* of San Pedro Alcántara would be holding what they call a *Gaspacho Flamenco* which is in fact a flamenco evening with the cold soup called *Gaspacho*, served. For want of anything better to do that evening (and also out of interest), I thought I would go along. I did wonder if it would only be open to members, but the fact that it had been announced on the radio and nothing said about that, convinced me to go anyway. On arrival I found that one did have to present a membership card (of their *Peña* or any other) but after a short chat with the chairman who was an amateur guitarist, and offering to accompany any of the singers if he should so wish, we (there were four of us) were allowed in.

The extent of his hospitality was felt when I realised that the *Gaspacho*, as well as a plate of *Callos con garbanzos*, bottles of

Sherry and glasses of *Sangría* were automatically served to everyone, the cost of which, to be hopefully recuperated during a raffle. There was a very family-like atmosphere, the food having been prepared there in enormous pots by some of the members themselves whose children were running around the tables playing, all out on a pebbled patio with a stage at one end. After a little while, the club's chairman came onto the stage (switched off the cassette-tape flamenco which had been going) and welcomed us all, pointing out the fact that they had amongst them, four guests from foreign lands (I was the only non-spaniard), one of which was a guitarist from "Germany or Norway". I'm used to this now; Norway is a new one for me, usually after telling them that I'm English, they call me American or German. It's a bit annoying, but I suppose the same happens when English people confuse Spanish with Mexican or Italian.

The evening's entertainment commenced with a half a dozen little girls all dressed in costume, dancing a few steps of Rumba each. One in particular stood out as having a natural talent, seen in her body movements and her grasping of the small details which gave her real *Gracia*. They were accompanied by the club's chairman who sang as well as played his guitar. After that, singing members of the *Peña* were invited onto the stage, one by one, to "do their bit" and here I found to my surprise that they all would sing either *malagueñas*, *media granáinas*, *fandangos* or *tientos*; there was an uncommon lack of *Cantes* "A Compás", no *solea*, *Seguiriyas*, *bulerías* etc. In the *cantes Libres* (one would expect *malagueñas* being in the province of Málaga) the singing was reasonable but in the *tientos*, the *compás*, rather insecure. Later on, I seem to remember someone attempting *bulerías*, but it was totally out of *compás* and unacceptable. The chairman's accompaniment all evening (he was the only guitarist present apart from myself) was very poor, but of course they are just *aficionados*. It was disappointing nevertheless, to find the general level of expertise so low amongst such a devoted gathering of Andalucian Spaniards, the very people who should understand most about flamenco, especially as they take their *Cante* so seriously.

About two hours must have passed at least, when a gypsy who had been at the back with his wife and children, joined at his table by some non-gypsy friends, was called up to sing something. He took his seat on stage (*cantaos* traditionally sing seated when not in conjunction with dance) and proceeded to recite some verses of humour much to the surprise and delight of the audience. It was obvious that he neither took himself nor his performance too seriously, but more as fun, going on to sing some *bulerías*, perfectly in *compás*, with very good *Aire* and to a professional standard. It makes one wonder whether there could be something in the blood, but then I know nothing about his background, there could be a logical explanation. He left the stage having evidently enjoyed himself.

A little later, our chairman/guitarist was quite naturally eager to take a break, so just before a lady was about to give us a song, he called me up to relieve him. She looked a bit uneasy, not to say unhappy about the change, but after her rendition of a *Media Granáina* she went back to her table happy. I then accompanied another singer for yet more *malagueñas*,

granainas and *tientos*, who later invited me to play for him on the following Monday at another *peña* further down the coast. I accepted. Next up was a young man who sang some *fandangos* totally out of tune and after him someone else that wanted *soleá*. At last!! Unfortunately he was out of *compás* most of the time, but the gypsy from before had appeared right up by the side of the stage and started to give some very nice *palmas*, so I admit that I played more with the *palmas* than for the *cante* where my undivided attention ought to have been. That was the most enjoyable part of the evening for me, except for the food and drink, of course.

On the Monday, I went to the other *peña* where I found the level of artistry lower still. I normally have maintained the theory that apart from the occasional exception, the only people who really understand flamenco are the artistes themselves; I think that maybe I should adjust that to "Professional artistes".

Back in Madrid for my third week of holiday, I went along to the Café de Chinitas one night for a drink and to say hello to old friends, finding some of the same artistes still there since the time I was working there myself. They all agreed that there was very little work about and that one had to accept whatever was offered; those in *tablaos* tend to be reluctant to go away on contracts abroad for fear of not getting back into a *tablaos* on their return. I was told that quite a few singers had left Madrid to live back in their own provinces of Andalucía whilst the highly respected guitarist Pepe Maya ("Marote's" brother) has even taken his home and family permanently to Mexico. On the other hand, the country's Ministry of Culture seems to be doing more than ever to promote flamenco and the television giving it more coverage than I have ever known.

I spent a very enjoyable day with my friend Victor Monge "Serranito" who I am very happy to see is now, thanks to good work done by his management, filling his calendar with a world-wide concert schedule, receiving the international exposure and acclaim he deserves. He explained to me how there is a type of "New Wave" flamenco being developed which breaks many of the traditional rules of the music and thus really would be incorrect to term "flamenco"; to use his own words "A new form of expression". This style of composition bases itself on the various flamenco *toques* and even maintains the *compás*, but has an unprecedented freedom of harmony, melody and syncopation. It is only natural, I suppose, that those flamenco guitarists with an abundance of musical creativity, need the extra room to expand. The result is that the art is being split up into two branches as in blues and jazz. Considering that in this new style, all the traditional rules (except that of *compás*) can be discarded, it made me wonder if this could mean that virtually any musician would be capable of composing it without having the years of experience I and many others claim to be indispensable to create "authentic" flamenco. If this is so, it has been done already many years back by artistes such as Miles Davis. Victor played me some of the new material he is working on at the moment and, at least in his case, I don't think this theory applies, instead we have more the "variations on a theme", by which I mean that to understand the complexities of the new music, one would need to understand the pattern from which it has been cut. You wouldn't be able to fully appreciate the variations unless you were previously familiar with the theme. The danger I see is that it could become a style comprehended only by those who intimately know the old style.

The good effect the "jazzy" harmonies are having is to attract the attention of a much wider sector of the general public, both in and out of Spain, the same being so through the inclusion of other instruments from a "Pop" set-up, to a complete orchestra. At Victor's home, I heard for the first time his latest record which does use full orchestration and knowing the usual problem, that the guitarist who has composed the pieces has no control over the orchestral arrangements which are taken care of by the record company, I asked him how

closely if at all he was able to work with the arranger. On this L.P. he explained that the orchestral parts had been based on his own arrangements for three guitars, so there had been an adequate relationship.

The "New Wave" flamenco must have started about ten years ago; I was involved with it myself when I was living in Madrid, but then, although one could bend the rules to bring in new ideas, it was expected of you to retain the authentic flavour of the *toques* thus qualifying them to be accepted under the term flamenco. Now I have heard examples (by very proficient players) where the flavour is lost by extreme harmonic freedom, and whilst being pleasant music to the ears of the general public, it might as well have originated somewhere in South America.

There are those "flamencos" who, because of this, do not accept it and will continue to play in the traditional style. One such person and another very good friend of mine is Luis Pastor, with whom I also spent an enjoyable day at his home. His playing is renowned precisely for its flavour, giving the maximum amount of meaning to the music however few notes it may contain. We worked together for quite a few years as part as the Monge-Pastor-Davies trio, in *tablaos* and also on tour in ballet companies. He had been working for the last number of years with the Spanish National Ballet, but decided to leave as they were doing very little work. Now he is a member of a group formed by Nina Conti, a Swiss girl (flamenco dancer) based in Zurich, who has done well by choosing only top quality guitarists and singers from Madrid to join her. She also makes use of flute, bass and violin. Luis is enjoying this work as he has the opportunity to compose music in his own very flamenco style and put it into practice on stage and record, seeing it appreciated by audiences in both Switzerland and Germany.

Authentic flamenco, I'm sure, will not die away and will always be available, as is "real" blues, if you know where to find it. So the "modern" flamenco that started about a decade ago bringing in new musical influences and instrumentation, and could have been seen as a passing fashion, is not only still with us, but has grown into a "new form of expression". I only hope it's not too long before a name is found for it, so that it can be categorized and differentiated so as not to be confused with "real" flamenco.

I found John Duarte's letter questioning points on flamenco, full of interesting themes for discussion. Not only would I have great pleasure in answering him, but I feel that the same questions must be in the minds of many others, or at least I hope so, as the issue of authenticity of music presented as Flamenco, needs to be understood even if only to help people to judge it for what it really is.

I think it fair to say that 'Spanish folk music' is not Flamenco, (will Reggae ever be termed 'English folk music' because an increasing number of white British artistes interpret it?).

Spanish gypsy folk music and some Andaluz (Arabic influenced) folk music, is Flamenco.

With reference to the acceptability of modern styles; for the hybridised product to remain 'true' to its description as 'Flamenco', it must first fall into one of the traditional categories such as *Cantinas*, *Soleares*, *Bulerías*, *Siguiriyas*, etc., and then retain its traditional flavour within the category. In the case mentioned of "Carlos Montoya and his nonsensical St. Louis Blues", he is trying to imitate the American Blues flavour "with a few strummings and fast runs introduced to make it recognisably 'Spanish' ". This is in no way Flamenco, not of course Blues.

Next month alegrías.

