

PEPE MARTINEZ IN NOTTINGHAM

by Graham Wade

PEPE Martinez is a happy, robust figure, a man with a large character who spreads around him an aura of enthusiasm, vigour, brilliance and shrewdness. His guitar playing points us towards serenity, lyricism and experience, and Pepe eschews the flashy virtuosity often characteristic of modern flamenco soloists. It was therefore a great pleasure to spend several hours in Pepe's company when with Robin Pearson as the host, the well-known guitarist performed under the sponsorship of the Nottingham Spanish Guitar Centre.

Pepe's approach to the guitar is essentially a healthy one; not for him the neurosis of the "up-tight" performance or the artistic temperament in its less congenial aspects. Pepe is only nervous, or so he told me, when he does not see the food on the plate; and yet with colossal self-assurance, founded naturally on more than four decades of concerts and gigs, goes a scrupulous and critical attitude towards the art of flamenco which is admirably refreshing.

Before the concert, in the Spanish Guitar Centre, Martinez was the most relaxed person there; smoking his habitual cigar in a manner reminiscent

probably stemmed from an essentially weak positioning of the left hand. Likewise, the unreliability and often weak sound of his bass notes originated in the acute "Tarrega wiggle" of a right hand thumb that lurked, for much of the time, coyly behind the fingers. It is a pity that a musician whose standing as a teacher is so high, should be tempted thus to step so far outside his capabilities, in public. For me, however, this does not lessen the value of his work on paper.

It is irrelevant to the above reviews, but I cannot resist ending on a happier note. Segovia's young son, Carlos Andres, now two-and-a-half years old, was with his mother, who was playing one of the maestro's recordings on her gramophone (before joining him in London); Carlos Andres, after listening attentively, crossed to the speaker and said "Daddy, come out!"

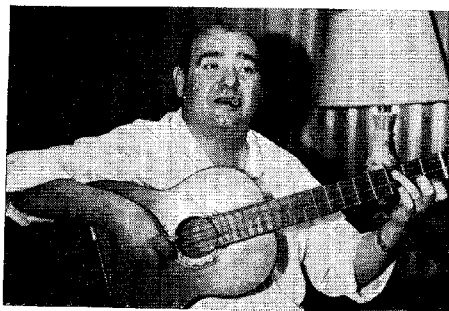
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of Tarrega, Pepe suddenly took his guitar out of his case, handed it to me, and putting on his trilby went out for a drink with a friend who had called for a chat, leaving Robin Pearson and myself to nourish the beautiful guitar and tune it ready for the concert. Pepe had lowered the strings considerably but once up to pitch, the guitar, a Barbero, spoke with a strangely classical timbre, quite unlike the more nasal tones of lighter instruments. On his return Pepe rang a friend in London before settling down to "warmers", a light running over the strings more for fun than anything else.

I accompanied Pepe in his new Renault in the drive to the college where the concert was to take place, with Robin Pearson leading the way at his usual energetic pace in a Ford Capri. Pepe, unlike most Spaniards I have met, is a somewhat cautious driver and was very proud of his new car; during the twenty minutes or so of the journey he never stopped talking at all and what he had to say was profoundly interesting. He spoke of Ramon Montoya, of the new trends in flamenco, some of which he found depressing or distasteful, and of his own art which is basically happy music, emanating from his own ebullient nature.

At the concert itself Pepe was equally relaxed; he walked from the car with no jacket and an open-necked shirt (unlike the indigenous English muffled against the icy Nottingham blast in overcoats) and warmed up before the concert in a corner of the hall, performing to set an atmosphere of informality.

The recital itself exemplified all that he had said about the art of flamenco; the music communicated itself effortlessly and lyrically, in a flow of soleares, rondenias, alegrias, columbianas, granadinas, sevillanas, campanilleros, and so on. Though nonchalant at times in his delivery of the music, and informally dressed, Pepe at two points in the programme fixed his audience in an icy stare during an outbreak of creaking chairs and whispering, stopping the nonsense in two seconds flat; occasionally after a particular brilliant run he would



pause and stare at the audience as if to say, "How about that!" and the capacity crowd sat enthralled for over two hours by the man's artistry. Pepe plays more gently than some flamenco players though without ever losing the pulse, drive and duende of his culture.

During the drive to the concert I had, rather foolishly, mentioned a few flamenco artists whose music seemed to me interesting; Pepe, with a lofty disdain assured me that there were any number of whizz-kids and technicians in Spain, and during the interval immediately asked me if I had noticed any difference between the players I had mentioned and himself; Pepe obviously feels strongly the threat of the more exhibitionistic types of flamenco players and those prominent in the English establishment appeal to him very little when he views the long perspectives of flamenco history. I won't mention any names but Pepe's scrupulous concern for the integrity of his flamenco is an endearing and purifying flame.

After the concert we all felt slightly exhausted, all of us that is except Pepe who was now more full of energy even than before the recital. So off to a steak house, and more of that brilliant and charming conversation of which Pepe is the undoubted master; Pepe makes friends the world over and rarely if ever stays in English hotels as any number of people are willing to offer hospitality to such a warm and confident spirit. After massive bear hugs, in the Spanish manner, Pepe Martinez left us; his Seville sunniness had warmed the English winter a little, and his music lingered in the ear rich in sweetness and authority.

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