

# FLAMENCO

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ANDALUSIAN music, with its origins in Byzantine and Jewish liturgy and its Moorish and Gypsy background, is the basis of much of Spanish music. This anthropological reservoir of conflicting cultures has fascinated composers whenever Spain was accessible. While it was fashionable at one time to write Spanish music in France, it is now equally fashionable to write French music in Spain. Bizet made a feeble attempt in the first direction, Falla a successful one in the latter. It is easier for a Spaniard to become a European than for a European to become a Spaniard. Musically the Spaniard depends upon the Gypsy, a fact recognized by Falla, whose home for years had been Granada. His friendship with the Gypsy dancers, singers and guitarists of that region is the inspiration for whatever is not Parisian in his music. Falla recognizes two influences, Debussy and the Gypsy, and the music of the Spanish Gypsy is guitar music. If one remains conscious of the guitar in listening to Spanish music many of its peculiarities can be explained. The guitar is tuned in fourths, an ancient Near-Eastern method. The structure of the guitar accounts somewhat for the strangeness of flamenco\* music. Another distinguishable trait is the rhythm, which in many cases cannot be written down in musical notation. It is startling in its many unexpected accents and silences.

The adoption by the Spanish church of the Byzantine liturgic chant with its absence of metric rhythm in the melody and its richness of modulated inflection, as well as the Jewish and Arab influences are elements to be evaluated in a discussion of *Cante Jondo* (deep song, the purest type of Gypsy music) and flamenco dancing. Medina Azara, leading authority on Arabic and Hebrew music, puts forth the hypothesis that *cante jondo* derives from the singing of the Sephardic Jew. He suggests that the Hebrew word *Jom Tov*, meaning feast day, became as pronounced by the Spaniard *jondo*. He compares the *Kol Nidrei* of the Sephardic Jew to the Spanish *saeta* (the songs heard during Holy Week). He thinks the guitar prelude of the *saeta* corresponds exactly to the silent meditation in the

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\*Flamenco is a term applied to everything Gypsy in Spain. It is believed that it originally meant Flemish mercenary soldiers and because of an imagined similarity in unsocial behavior it became synonymous with Gypsy.

beginning of the *Kol Nidrei*. He points out that the second part called the *Weserre* is exact in its agonized wail to the *ayyyyyyy* shrilled by the singer of *cante jondo*. Azara also claims that the *Kol Nidrei* is based on an authentic incident of the Inquisition: its origin is the wail of terror let out by the Jews when the soldiers violated the Synagogue of Segovia. His hypothesis is as imaginative as it is challenging. The fact remains that the similarity of Hebrew chants and *cante jondo* is obvious to all who have heard both.

### III

*Cante jondo* may owe a debt to the Sephardic chant but the flamenco dance does not. For the Jew, even the Yemenite, has no dance that resembles the flamenco dancing of Andalusia. The chant of the Jew is on one emotional level — *mea culpa*. Flamenco dancing runs the gamut of emotions from happiness through mischievousness, piety and sensual appetite to revenge. Here the Gypsy has benefitted from the other racial element, the contribution of the Arab. For it is a truism that the music of the Persians and the Byzantines became the basis of Andalusian music, and the Moorish lute the parent of the Spanish guitar. To the present day, in what is the Arab equivalent of *cuadro flamenco*, (a group of dancers, singers and guitarists, seated in a semi-circle, accompanying each other by *palmas* [hand-clapping] as each in turn dances or sings). The audience approves with the cry *Allah*, just as the *Olé* is the sign of flamenco approval.

Flamenco music can rarely be taught and flamenco dancing, regardless of the travesty upon it by Spanish dancers, is equally a matter of blood and culture. For it is to a large extent a study in intuition and atavism. The *desplante*,\* it is true relies upon a rhythmical indication that might loosely be called a technical device. But mostly the dance is primarily a study in rhythms. Those rhythms are exact and the *zapateados* (heel-beats) must express those rhythms accurately. *Baile gitano* (the Gypsy dance) as well as *cante gitano* relies upon the total collaboration of the guitar or the *palmas*. The dancer must feel the rhythms of the guitar or the *palmas* not vaguely but accurately. He cannot be a fraction off rhythm or it is not *baile gitano*.

There has probably been no greater destruction to flamenco dancing than the attempt to perform it to the piano. This imposition was placed upon it by Spanish dancers who were not *gitanos*. It is true that the Gypsy, Faico, greatest of all *farruca* dancers, was the first to dance it to the piano. This was done in collaboration with Otero, the Sevillian dancing teacher,

\*An extremely important part of the flamenco dance, marked by a break in the rhythm and a characteristic facial expression. It is preceded by a signal to the guitarist, usually a *zapateado*.

and the composer Sopena. No one man did more to bring about the present decadence of flamenco dancing than Otero, for the dancers trained in his school rarely were Gypsies. Piano transcriptions create an inexactness that makes the dance and music non-flamenco. The current use of castanets in much so-called flamenco dancing is also attributed to Otero. The *gitanos* have always left castanet playing to classical dancers, or to their women in such dances as the *sevillanas* and others not quite flamenco. They consider snapping the fingers more appropriately masculine. In this country, under the confusion that Beverly Hills is the Sacre Monte, many Hollywood trained Spanish dancers do flamenco with castanets. In fact, one of the finest players of castanets is a Hollywood trained Mexican dancer whose flamenco is so spinsterish as to be ludicrous.

Flamenco dancing is Spanish dancing only in the sense that it is done by the Gypsy of Andalusia. Nothing is more ruinous to it than that it should be done by most of the Spanish dancers of non-Gypsy blood. It is true that an occasional *busno* (non-Gypsy) Spanish dancer reaches a rare excellence in the flamenco dance as exemplified by Argentinita in the *alegrías*, Goyita Herrero in the *zapateado* and Juan Martinez in the widest range of flamenco dancing I have seen in this country. Still it remains the dance of the *roms*. I have seen *romanos* from Macedonia, North Africa, even the usually *non dansant* Roumanian *roms*, obeying as it were some atavism, get up, after seeing flamenco dancing, and take part in the improvisations of the *cuadro flamenco*. This is equally true of the various Gypsy guitarists. Django, the famous French Gypsy, known in the Paris and London night clubs for his rendition of "jazz américain", after hearing an *alegrías* played by Carlos Montoya, returned to the zone in Clichy and played *alegrías* in a *cuadro flamenco* of Andalusian Gypsies. The most likely explanation would be the common Hindu origin of the Gypsy, and the deep racial intuition that comes from a mutual cultural inheritance.

In the United States the only flamenco dancing that is at all authentic is limited to about a dozen professional dancers who know the genre *baile gitano*. Juan Martinez, Nina and Fidel Zabal, Soledad Miralles, José Vega and of course the Argentinita ensemble which includes Antonio Garcia Matos, known as Antonio Triana. Of these, José Vega and Antonio Triana, are of Gypsy blood. Of the flamenco guitarists in this country, Villarino, Carlos Montoya, Fidel Zabal, and Antonio Perez are the names most popularly known to the flamencos. Vicente Gomez while a great

innovator and artist with the guitar is not strictly speaking a flamenco guitarist. The concertizing of flamenco themes by Gomez has made of his interpretations something esthetically wider in a musical sense but at the same time it has robbed his playing of the true flamenco style.

Of singers of *cante jondo* we have only one, Villarino. La Gitanilla and Consuela Moreno are flamencas, but their style, excellent for what it is, is not *cante jondo*. In this country one can only hear the shrill *ayyyyyyy* that defiantly starts the *cante flamenco* among the gypsies who are not professionally occupied with *cante jondo*. These *gitanos* retain completely the style of *cante jondo* but their songs are not sung in Spanish, not even in the mixed Calo-Spanish of Granada but in as pure Romany as a non-Macedonian *rom* can sing or speak. One cannot discuss flamenco dancing apart from *cante jondo*. The *cante jondo* is the back drop of the flamenco dance. Therefore it is necessary to describe the various *estilos* of *cante jondo* to explain flamenco dancing.

The following, while far from comprehensive, includes the most usual *cante* and *baile flamenco*.

SOLEARES – Called by Machado "La Madre del Cante" it varies from the most passionate of songs to the most haughty. While it is the most plastic of all *cante jondo* it defies musical notation. Its fundamental rhythm is the following: "'--'-'--'-- It is mostly sung and rarely danced.

SIGUIRIYA GITANA – Completely different from Castilian Seguidillas, its rhythm is the most complicated of all *cante jondo*, alternating bars of 6/8 and 3/4 time. Musicians find that the rhythm cannot be analyzed. The three strongly accented first beats followed by a silence are very puzzling to the uninitiate. The nostalgic mood and repetitious melancholy of the Siguriya are unforgettable especially if one has had the good fortune to have heard it sung by Manuel Vallejo or Manolito Torres.

PETERNERAS – This has, in common with the Habañeras, Tientos and Gua-

jiras, a strong Negro influence. Originally sung in Cadiz, it migrated to Cuba and returned to Spain. It is 3/4 alternating with 3/8.

SAETA – The Saetas, the "arrows of song", are sung as vocal offerings to the saints as their statues pass in the Holy Week procession in Seville. At times Carceleras or prison songs are substituted for the hymns of praise. The Saeta has a haunting, piercing quality.

CORRUCOS – This is a song that celebrates local or current events. It is not unusual for it to be sung with a mixture of Arab, Hebrew and Gypsy words. It is flamenco but not really *cante jondo*.

MARTINETE – Neither Soleares nor Siguriya are more *gitano* than this song. It is sung without accompaniment. It is often the woe begotten song of the prison; then it is called a *carcelera*. A three line refrain can be added to the usual four line or double four line coplas.

**FANDANGO** – Similar to Jota not only in its melody but in its tempo which is 3/4, it is one of the simplest of the flamenco rhythms. It is both sung and danced and the tempo is faster when it is danced. It begins in major and it continues in minor, the variations and melody being in minor.

**RONDEÑA, MALAGUENA, GRANADINA** – Similar to the Fandango but slower, the Rondeña while taking its name from Ronda is sung by Gypsies throughout all of Spain. Falla says that the Malagueña and Granadina come from the Rondeña. The name of the great flamenco singer Chacon is associated with the Granadina.

**ALEGRÍAS** – It is the opposite of the Siguiriya in so far as it expresses extreme

joy. Certain Alegrías are called Jotas of Cadiz. It is in a lively 3/4 time sung and danced. It is one of the most difficult of the flamenco dances.

**BULERÍAS** – The time and the accent resemble the Alegrías. It can be sung in major or in minor, and is slower when it is sung than when it is danced. The rhythm is similar to the Soleá from which some believe it is derived.

**TANGO** – The rhythm of the flamenco tango is different from the Argentinian tango in spite of the fact that they are both 2/4 time. It is played in major.

**FARRUCA** – This is believed to be a Galician dance adapted by the Andalusian Gypsies. It is also in 2/4 time. It is played in minor.

It is not unusual for this classification to be further sub-divided into one that connects the individual *canto* with the name of some famous *cantaor*. There is a *siguiriya El Manolito*, named for Manuel Torres, greatest living singer of *siguiriyas gitanas*. Flamenco singing and dancing are traditional in their style but not static. They permit and insist that the *cantaor* or *bailaor* leave the imprint of his own individuality. What is particularly interesting is to note the recurring influences of certain Gypsy families on the *cante jondo* and *flamenco* dancing. Faico certainly left his influence on the *farruca*. Vicente Escudero has given this dance as distinct a personal coloring as Juan Breva gave to the singing of the *malagueña*.

The Caganchos, a family of *gitanos* reaching from Triana to Tangier have exerted as varied an influence on flamenco as there are members of this great Gypsy family. Related to this tribe are Matias, the flamenco who captivated Paris and pre-revolutionary Russia, Faico, Cagancho de Triana, singer of *carceleras*, as well as the American born *gitano*, José Vega, whose *zapateados* make of the *bulerías* a dance as subtle as it is spontaneous.

The Amayas are perhaps the most talked of family at present in Granada because of Carmen. Carmen Amaya appeared several years ago in Paris in a revue starring Raquel Meller. She became immediately a



controversial figure. She is appearing currently in South America where she has astonished the *aficionados* who are comparing her to Pastora.

And of course no one has influenced the whole of *cante jondo* and flamenco dancing like Pastora Imperio. It was of Pastora that Jacinto Benevente said seeing her made him believe in God. To Anglo-Saxons this may sound blasphemous, but as there is only one God so there is only one Pastora.

La Niña de los Peines of the family Pavon is considered after Pastora the most exciting of singers of *cante jondo*. Hers is one of the last of the great flamenco voices. Her name will be revered by *aficionados* as long as there is a memory of deep song. She belongs in the company of Chacon, Fosforito, Cepero, El Cojo de Malaga, Juan Breva, Manuel Vallejo and Manolito Torres.

Antonio Triana, most outstanding dancer of *bulerías*, has natural gifts for mimicry that make him one of the most pleasing and entertaining of all the *bailaores gitanos*.

Carmen La Joselito is the dancer of *alegrías*. Brought to Paris by Argentinita to dance flamenco in her ballets, La Joselito returns often to that city, for in Paris La Joselito is one of the most popular of concert artists.

A list of flamencos who have influenced their song and dance would be too lengthy but a few names to conjure with are Dora la Cordobesita, Concha Borrul, La Macarrona, Paula la Gitanilla and Maria Vargas. These, like all the others mentioned, are of Gypsy blood. It is true that some of the Amaya family, several of the Caganchos, as well as Antonio Triana, Manuel Vallejo and José Vega may be mixed with other racial strains, particularly Arab and Sephardic, but their predominating racial stock is *gitano*.

### III

A difference between flamenco and the classical Spanish dancing that is often overlooked is the psychological one of class and cultural pattern. The classical Spanish and the flamenco dance are two very separate entities. The Gypsy apologizes to no one. He lacks the self-consciousness of the Spaniard before modern plumbing and the acquisition of academic laurels. The Spaniard's constant concern with his personal dignity and his attempts to impress the foreigner with his superior European culture misfit him for the *baile gitano*. The flamenco dance is not the dance to express the nuances of European nobility and virtue. The *Español's* concern with class nobility

and the *Española's* concern with class virtue is often carried to absurdity. This extreme self-consciousness about caste is important to notice if one is to understand the two traditions of the dance in Spain. The regional folk dance and the classical Spanish dance belong to the European world of Christian chivalry. *Boleros*, *jotas* as well as the Castilian *seguidillas* are of the spirit that created the eclectic tradition of the Italian-French ballet. They are close kin to the very dances – Basque and Catalanian – from which ballet borrowed steps. They are dances belonging to whatever is European in the Spanish dance tradition – the desire for the *danse noble*.

It is a long trip from the *danse du ventre* to the *baile flamenco*, but it is a trip that has been made. For the basis of a great deal of the movement used in flamenco dancing finds its origin in the dances of the Arabian world. Not only in the sensuous movement of the torso but in the use of the arms, the *palmas*, the playing of cymbals and the castanets and in the *zapateados*. The Gypsies are the liaison between the Occident and the Orient. As such, they have preserved for that northernmost portion of Africa called Spain a memory of its Oriental past and a dance that no European can change and few can do.