

History of Flamenco

by George Wills

The Catholic reconquest of southern Spain in 1492 resulted in the persecution of all non-Christian peoples who were living in the region. Flamenco music is said to have been formed through the shared experience of Muslims, Jews, and Gitanos (Gypsies) during this time, who largely inhabited harsh rural environments after leaving cities to preserve their way of life. Today, flamenco is first and foremost a Gitano art form.

Originally, flamenco music is thought to have been sung with the simple accompaniment of a wooden cane hitting the ground. From the late 18th century flamenco music begins to appear in written accounts, and interpretations of flamenco music even appears in song books. By this time, the songs were accompanied by guitar, clapping, foot stomping, and dance.

From the mid-19th century, flamenco was increasingly performed in mainstream Spanish society through ticketed events in music cafes. This eventually led to *Opera Flamenca* in the first part of the 20th century in which flamenco gained immense popularity in Spain and beyond. In Spain promoters and performers could minimise the taxes paid on earnings under this new theatrical banner of 'Opera', and audiences increased with the use of large theatres. During this period many new styles of flamenco were born and popularised. The two most popular were the *Fandangos* (influenced by Andalusian Folk Music) and *cantes de ida y vuelta* (songs of Latin American origin).

Many interpret this period as a decline in the artistic integrity of flamenco as the more traditional forms began to disappear from performances due to the over-commercialisation of the genre.

However, flamenco enjoyed a renaissance from the 1950s where a few traditionalist exponents resurrected the genre, so to speak. Great artists began to emerge paying respects to the deeper traditional styles alongside the newer and adopted styles previously mentioned. From the late 1960s two of the greatest interpreters of flamenco emerged; the singer, Camerón de la Isla and the guitarist, Paco de Lucía. Working together, and in their individual pursuits, both artists paved the way for modern flamenco. Musically, Paco de Lucía expanded the harmonic possibilities within the existing styles of flamenco, drawing from jazz and Latin music which is now part of the language of flamenco in modern times. What the history of flamenco demonstrates is that it is an art form which is continually evolving, despite its steadfast connection to the musical roots and traditions.

Flamenco musical styles are called *palos*. Each *palo* has a particular rhythmic metre (*compas*), mood, musical tonality, structural characteristic and sung verses. The verses are short poetic lines which deal with themes of everyday life, religious experiences, and everything from extreme anguish to light and joyful moments. The *compas* is a repetitive rhythmic cycle that has specific accents on certain beats, depending on the *palo*. The traditional *palos* are mostly in a 12-beat cycle. Within this, the alternating accented groups of two or three beats are reminiscent of

Spanish folk music and traditional dances of the 16th century such as the *Canarios*, *Zarabanda* and *Jácara*. *Palos* influenced by Andalusian folk music are often in triple time, and the *palos* inspired by Latin music are in 2/4, 3/4, or 4/4.

The traditional *palos* mostly employ the Phrygian mode, however many *palos* are in a major or minor tonality. There are some Phrygian-mode *palos* which can change to a major or minor key within a performance.

Performance of flamenco takes place in many scenarios in Spain; spontaneously at family or community gatherings, on the street, at ticketed flamenco venues such as a *Tablao* or *Peña*, *fiestas*, theatres, and at large-scale international music festivals.

Unless performed in a choreographed dance show or in a more composed musical performance led by a guitarist, flamenco is performed spontaneously. I won't say improvised, because the material (guitar interludes/sung verses/dance choreography) is already known or composed by each performer. In other words, the performers draw from their own personal or traditional material to create the performance. There are structural rules which need to be adhered to in terms of knowing where and when to 'pass the baton' to the other performer for their time to sing a verse, playing a guitar solo (*falseta*) or perform a dance solo. How long any performer holds the spotlight depends on them.

Every performance of flamenco in this manner is unique. Artists are expected to personalise their interpretations of existing material or compose new material within the style. To be a true flamenco, one must have an in-depth understanding and mastery of each of the commonly used *palos*. Most flamenco artists have grown up surrounded by flamenco, and children from flamenco families are carefully guided and taught by members of the family or community. It is an aural tradition, and flamencos live and breathe the music. The *compas* of each *palo* is embodied by practitioners, and the high level of rhythmic mastery and musicality found in flamenco artists is unique to the art form. In 2010, UNESCO inscribed flamenco to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.