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Flamenco Mind/Classical Mind

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After a concert appearance or casual gig, guitar aficionados will frequently appear and ask me a question. The aficionados explain that they are currently studying classical guitar with someone and would like to know if there is a good book on flamenco that they can get because they would like to learn some flamenco. These aficionados almost always give me an estimate of their music reading ability, some saying that they can sight-read well, and some saying that reading music is a struggle. The implication to be drawn from this is that many classical guitarists conceive of the flamenco guitar in much the same way that they conceive of the classical guitar, and assume that the way to learn it is to get a book of musically-notated flamenco (with or without a teacher) and read through it. The aficionados are usually perplexed when I tell them that, although there are many books on the market, flamenco cannot be learned from a book.

The fact is that the classical guitarist and the flamenco guitarist have very different approaches to the guitar, and to the music of the guitar. In short, the classical guitarist has a 'classical mind,' and the flamenco has a 'flamenco mind,' and the two are, for the most part, like the two hemispheres of the brain itself. Each is dedicated to entirely distinct functions. This article will explore some of the major differences between the classical and flamenco minds, in an attempt to show the classically-oriented aficionado a path by which to approach, understand, and appreciate flamenco. We shall see how flamenco originated far from the influences of the classical guitar world and gain some insight into why the flamenco guitar has changed from a simple Andalusian accompaniment form to one of the most exciting world class music genres in recent guitar history.

Flamenco's Roots

Let's examine the roots of the flamenco mind, and see how the origins of flamenco and classical guitar occurred in very different places. To begin with, flamenco is not Western music. It is Indo-European and Mediterranean, and this reflects its relationship to the music of North Africa, the Middle East and the Indian Sub-Continent. These influences converged in southern Spain at around AD 700, when the Moors (today the Moroccans) conquered and occupied what has come to be Andalusia.¹ The Moors were not evicted until AD 1492, but after almost 800 years, their influence on Spain was there to stay. At about the same time as the Moorish eviction, the Gypsies were moving in, and their origins and culture can be traced directly back to India. The music that was to become flamenco was cooking in a pot that included

strange instruments like the oud (which would later evolve into the lute), the né flute and strange singing styles that were related to the religious chants of the Moslems and Jews.

With this cultural background, it is clear that flamenco does not bear much relationship to so-called western classical music. Flamenco music is based on the modal scales common in the North African and Middle Eastern music. One of the modal scales that gives a characteristic flamenco sound is the phrygian scale, still used today. In the classical world, modal scales are used mostly in ethnic music, liturgical compositions, or pieces evoking an ancient feeling. Most classical guitar literature, of the 19th Century at least, is in Major and Minor scales, unless it happens to be a Spanish (or ethnic) piece. Then it might touch upon the phrygian mode. But flamenco music lives in the phrygian and other modal scales.

Lifestyles of Early Classical and Flamenco Guitarists

The early history of classical guitar music is based around composers and performers who were court composers in the employ of European nobility. Gaspar Sanz, Robert de Viseé, Luis Milán, and many others of this era were all employed as court musicians and composers. Their music may often seem 'folk' based, but it is a courtly folk. Even when we enter the golden age of early 19th century classical guitar, with Sor and Giuliani, the aristocratic mold had already been set. This was thoroughly western music, treated in a thoroughly western fashion. The patrons of the classical guitarists were still the nobility and the rich. As for the music, the rules had been set by Haydn and Mozart, and the court composers who went before them. Although Sor was a Spaniard by birth, his career took place in Paris, for the most part, and there is nothing very Spanish about the bulk of his music, which included waltzes, minuets, sonatas, and other typical forms of the era.² Also, many classical guitar methods arose at this time, designed to teach the educated man or woman how to play the guitar. The Italian schools were probably the most prominent, represented by Carcassi, Regondi, and others, while Sor and Aguado had their methodologies for the so-called Spanish school as well.

The flamenco during the early 19th Century is almost completely unknown, though there are vague historical references to it. We can infer that it existed, but certainly not in the courts. It arose from music of the non-aristocrats. It was in the streets, taverns, and private parties. Gypsies (and often prostitutes) were often hired by rich people to entertain at their parties. This is very reminiscent of Jazz's origins in the Storyville section of New Orleans, where drugs and prostitutes went hand in hand with Jazz. The history of flamenco definitely has its sordid side.

By the late 19th Century flamenco had caught the eye and ear of the public of Andalusia, and flamenco clubs began to open featuring local flamenco singers, guitarists, and eventually dancers. There is evidence that this was partly facilitated by the arrival of the Antonio Torres guitar, which was, according

to some, including noted guitar luthier Richard Bruné³, originally introduced as a cheap instrument for the flamencos, not as an aristocratic instrument for the noble classical composers.⁴ The *Café Cantante*, as it was called, was essentially a small theater, often run by the local flamenco singer. It became the flamenco night club, and is the mother of today's *tablaos flamenco*.

The early flamenco artists were certainly not 'schooled' musicians. They played with *rasgueados* (strumming techniques) and mostly a thumb *ligado* technique, which were to become the hallmarks of flamenco. A very few flamenco guitarists, in particular, Rafael Marín and Ramón Montoya, toyed with the classical guitar of the era, incorporating certain arpeggios and classical techniques into flamenco. The move towards the classical had disastrous effects for Rafael Marín. Marín wrote a flamenco methodology book called "*Método de Guitarra – Flamenco por Musica y Cifra*". It utilized both tablature (*cifra*) and standard written musical notation (*musica*). The response to it virtually ended his career and thrust him into obscurity. The classical guitarists considered him a flamenco guitarist because of the music he played. However, the flamenco guitarists considered him a classical guitarist because he could read music and had had been associated with Tárrega! As a result, both groups rejected him, showing clearly the clash of minds. ⁵

The Cante and Baile

The *cante* is the backbone of all flamenco. It is often called the mother of flamenco. Derived from Hindu and Semitic chants, the *cante* became the vocal style of the flamencos. In order to be a flamenco guitarist, one must understand how to accompany some 20 or so distinct styles of flamenco *cante*. These styles or forms have names like *buleria*, *soleares*, or *alegrías*. Each style can have many variations, but they are all structured according to a rhythmic and harmonic scheme. It is thoroughly useless to run out to the local music store and buy a piece of "flamenco" sheet music called *Soleares* or *Buleria*, and then try to accompany a flamenco singer with it. The *cante* has its own rules, structure and rhythm (and some have no rhythm!). The guitarist must literally accompany what the singer does, and go where the singer goes harmonically and rhythmically. In the old days, it was enough for a guitarist to know a few chords and the rhythmic structure, and just play along with the singer, more or less by rote. If you could accompany one singer, you could accompany them all. But soon it got more complicated. Singers got better and so did the guitarists. Today's flamenco guitarist must accompany a wide range of *cantes*, and be able to accompany anyone who sits down with him, on the spot. The professional flamencos must also invent their own melodies, called *falsetas*, with which to accompany the singer.

The *Baile* is the dance. The word is related to the "Ballet," but there is nothing classical about flamenco dance. In the late 19th Century, flamenco dance began to evolve into the form we see today, and was added to the flamenco performance on a regular basis. A flamenco dancer is a percussionist as well as a dancer, and the rhythms of flamenco are difficult and highly syncopated. The flamenco guitarist's job is

to accompany the flamenco dancer's constantly shifting rhythmical variations, following her or him with precise, percussive accompaniment. In addition, the guitarist must also play melodic falsetas to enhance the action, just as he does for the singer. These falsetas are often original, and sometimes copied from some other guitarist. But even when copied, they are often changed, altered, inverted, and disguised.

Now the classical guitar literature is filled with pieces called gigue, minuet, zarabande, tanz, Spanish dance, and even fandango (the fandango is one of flamenco's main forms). But you would be hard-pressed today to find a classical guitarist who knows what these dances are, let alone how they were originally accompanied. The classical guitarist approaches these things as abstractions, not as actual dance forms. It is no surprise, then, that the classical player tends to view learning flamenco in the same abstract way.

Flamenco's "Classical" Recital Era

Ramón Montoya was one of the first flamenco guitarists to start playing the flamenco guitar as a solo instrument. Others followed immediately, including the maestro and virtuoso Sabicas. Sabicas was to define what being a concert flamenco guitarist meant for much of the 20th Century.

Montoya and Sabicas essentially adopted the classical "Segovia model" of the guitar recital. (Of course, Segovia did not innovate the classical guitar recital format – Tárrega most likely did. 4) One guitarist, alone, sitting on the stage, playing a solo recital. It was a natural enough thing to do, since classical guitar recitals were certainly nothing new. Many other flamenco soloists emerged following the same model, with minor variations. The way of presenting the recital may have imitated the classical guitar style to a degree, but the major difference was that the flamenco guitarists were playing flamenco, not classical guitar repertoire. This means that the guitar had to imitate the flamenco singing, the dance, and musical interludes. The solo flamenco guitar recital, and each particular flamenco piece, had to be a microcosm of the flamenco mind, of the flamenco world.

Classical guitar pieces of the 19th and most of the 20th Century were composed according to the rules of Western classical music. A sonata by Fernando Sor, for example, basically follows the same structure of A-B-A (Exposition-Development-Recapitulation) that a Haydn or Mozart sonata does. A flamenco piece, in contrast, is made up of the individual musical falsetas, arranged in some kind of linear fashion, mixed with the characteristic rasgueados, or strumming patterns. These falsetas and rasgueados are all rhythmically and harmonically related to the piece, and most flamenco solo pieces follow the cante or dance form upon which they are based. In other words, a buleria or an alegria should sound like the cante or baile of a buleria or an alegria. To the classically trained, non-flamenco ear, the piece might

appear to be A-B-C-D-E... and seem to be rather unstructured. In fact, it is following a precise flamenco structure, and a flamenco-trained ear hears it clearly because a well-trained flamenco ear understands the cante or baile form on which it is based. It must also be emphasized here that the professional flamenco guitarists create their own falsetas; that is, they “compose” or innovate musical passages for themselves to play. This is why every competent guitarist has his own soleares, for example, which is musically different from every other guitarist's soleares. It is built on different falsetas and sequences.

The famous classical guitarists in the 19th Century may have written music for themselves, but much of it was intended for an admiring guitar public to play. Many of today's classical guitarists have works commissioned for themselves to play, but the pieces also can also become available for the guitar playing public. Classical music is almost always composed for other musicians to play, note for note, according to the written score. This cannot be stressed enough, and marks a major difference between the flamenco and classical worlds.

The Flamenco Concertos

The flamenco world has had other flirtations with the classical guitar world. Classical guitar concertos have always been pretty popular, so the concert flamenco guitarists began to experiment with flamenco guitar concertos. These were not of the same structure as the most popular classical guitar concertos, like Rodrigo's Concerto de Aranjuez or any of Giuliani's concertos. Most classical guitar concertos tend to be based on a basic classical era style. In other words, a three movement concerto, in basic sonata form. ⁶ (Today there are exceptions, of course, such as Rodrigo's Concierto Madrigal.)

The flamenco concertos tended to be four movement forms, with each movement based on one of the 20 or so flamenco styles. For example, Sabicas's falsetas were orchestrated into his first concerto by Moreno-Torroba, and included an alegría, a fandango, a solea por buleria and a buleria. ⁷ His second concerto was orchestrated by Cofiner and included a guajira, a soleares, a rondeña, and his famous zapateado en re. ⁸ Several other flamenco guitarists had their own concertos, including Carlos Montoya and Mario Escudero.

A problem occurred with most of these early concertos. Most of them were written around pre-existing falsetas composed in a flamenco context by the guitarists themselves. The orchestrations, however, often cut the original flamenco music into pieces, inserting orchestral embellishments in a tutti fashion. That is, soloist plays, orchestra plays, etc. Such orchestrations all too often dilute the potency of the original flamenco music. Flamenco music, as we have been discovering, requires the context of cante and baile in order to be understood. These concertos have not done an adequate job of having the orchestra play the role of singer or dancer. They simply provide an abstract orchestral accompaniment

to the guitar. A new generation of flamenco guitarists is still experimenting with classical orchestrations, but fortunately, these contemporary guitarists tend to have a better understanding of classical and modern harmonies than their predecessors did, and they are often part of the composing process. An example of this new breed is flamenco guitarist Manolo Sanlúcar, who wrote a guitar-orchestral work called *Aljibe*.⁹ Because this flamenco maestro took the time to formally study orchestral composition, he was able to create a work that better blends the classical and flamenco worlds.

Flamenco Finds its Soul Mate

Flamencos are always experimenting, looking for new ways of expressing flamenco. Flamenco has always grown by absorbing music from other cultures, assimilating what works and discarding what doesn't. So while they were playing flamenco concertos with orchestras, many flamenco guitarists were also forming flamenco companies and ensembles incorporating jazz musicians, world music musicians, and percussionists of all musical styles. Tomatito and Paco de Lucía began using jazz saxophonist Jorge Pardo and electric bassist Carles Benavent in their groups. Actually, this is not so revolutionary – Sabicas recorded with jazz saxophonist in the 30's and a rock group in the 70's,¹⁰ and Carlos Montoya recorded with a jazz combo in the late 50's.¹¹ Paco de Lucía worked with jazz guitarists John McLaughlin, Al DiMeola, and Larry Coryell, absorbing jazz's particular approach to improvisation. His original flamenco sextet, with Pardo, Benavent, percussionist Rubem Dantas, and brothers Pepe de Lucía and Ramón de Algeciras, debuted in the 80s and forever changed the performing style of flamenco.¹² Many traditional flamencos, brought up on the classical model of guitar recital presentation, thought Paco had left the field, becoming commercialized and turning 'jazz.' In reality, only the presentation style of the music was from jazz. The way the jazz musicians could interact with the flamenco musicians with spontaneity and real punch was due to the fact that both traditions were based on this spontaneity and improvisational style. Paco was not the only one to reach this conclusion. Manolo Sanlúcar released his album *Flamenco Fantasy in Jazz* at about the same time.¹³ These experiments, in which flamencos discovered that jazz musicians had an affinity for flamenco, and vice versa, opened the door to a revolution in which the jazz presentation model of recital presentation has been added to the traditional guitar recital format.

The results of this shift are several and important. First, is the inclusion of additional instrumentation into a flamenco guitar concert. Most of the top concert and recording flamenco guitarists seldom play solo guitar, Segovia/Sabicas - style, any more. The recital will include one or more guitars, flamenco singers, and possibly a flute, violin, string bass or electric bass, and lots of percussion. The music performed will always be based on the lead guitarist's material, original or arranged. Sometimes a dancer may double as a percussionist. Second, some of the contemporary recitals will arrange the music to include an improvisatory section, as jazz groups do, where the lead is passed around to the various other instrumentalists in the ensemble. In this kind of presentation, a theme may be first introduced by the guitarist, and then picked up by the flautist or violinist, backed up by the guitar and percussion. Third, if there is a guitar solo, it is included as part of the overall ensemble setting. These trends do not mean that solo recitals never happen today, but only that there are now formats available other than

the one-man show. One of the notable performances of the XIII Sevilla Biennial was Gerardo Núñez performing a 1½ hour solo recital, which was seen as a departure from the now normal ensemble recital. 14

None of this is to imply that flamencos are now playing jazz. What contemporary flamencos still play is flamenco, based on the same cante, the same baile, and the same rhythms that 19th and 20th Century flamencos played. But the music has been enriched by the addition of harmonies borrowed from jazz, classical music, and all forms of world music. The music need not be written down in classical guitar notation, as it would be if classically trained musicians were involved. The written page can be a real hindrance for the flamenco improviser!

Conclusion

The classical guitar world is a historical development that grew out of the courts, the aristocracy, and the patronage of the rich. It's reliance on standard written notation for its musical memory made it ideal for being taught in music schools and conservatories. Flamenco developed, most-likely, out of street music, only much later, becoming a 'school' of the guitar. However, even today, the flamenco school is found not in conservatories, but in flamenco dance academies and other flamenco gatherings, and learning to accompany a dancer or singer has little to do with written guitar music. The most important thing for the classical guitarist to understand about flamenco guitarists is that flamencos are not trying to be classical guitarists. The flamenco and classical minds can understand each other only if each makes a sincere effort to enter and understand the other's world. This requires effort and a willingness to give up one's preconceptions.

The flamenco guitar performance today is bigger than the soloist, because flamenco is bigger than the guitar. The flamenco guitarist thinks in terms of cante, baile, percussion, and guitar. The flamenco presentaion format which is fast becoming standard in contemporary flamenco, at least among the top artists, is the ensemble, patterned on the jazz improvisational model. But don't let the flamenco violinist and flamenco flautist up there next to the traditional singers, dancers, and guitarists fool you. Listen carefully and you'll still hear the echos of the Middle Eastern oud, the Egyptian né flute, and the chant from the minaret.

Author's Bio

Valdemar Phoenix has devoted his life to the world of flamenco. He has appeared at major festivals, college campuses, schools and arts events. He is on the touring roster of the Texas Comission on the Arts and the Mid America Arts Alliance. He performs frequently with his wife Lucia and their flamenco

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