



# Flamenco

Zuzana Jurková

## Etymology

The term *flamenco* (= Flemish) appeared at the end of the 18th century in the sense of haughty and ostentatious; at the same time, the word gives the name to the flamingo bird, whose body carriage with its long neck and risen leg reminds one of the typical body posture of a flamenco dancer.

## History of flamenco

The earliest accounts, from the beginning of the 19th century, report musical "parties" where *gitanos* played and sang for entertainment, supported and rewarded by the local notables (members of the nobility and land-owners).

The period between around 1840 and 1920 is considered to be the "Golden Age" of *flamenco*: both in Madrid and Sevilla, so-called *café cantantes* (musical cafés) were open at that time; musicians and dancers of *flamenco* were performing there on the basis of work contracts. At that time, the distinctive vocal character of flamenco was formulated – *cante*; dancing also became important. From the beginning of the 20th century – especially under the influence of Ramón Montoya – guitar playing evolved from being a mere accompanying feature – so that, from the middle of the 20th century, one can also encounter guitar playing without voice. The period of *café cantantes* is, however, also considered to be the beginning of the commercialisation of *flamenco*.

During the period from the 1920's to the 1950's, two attitudes to flamenco confronted each other: on the one hand the commercial style – known as *opera flamenco* (*operísima*) featuring sentimental songs (*cuplé flamenco*), which were influenced by Spanish *zarzuelas* and Latin-American folklore, with vocal fireworks and theatrical effects. This style provoked – on the other hand – criticism from Spanish intellectuals and artists (M. de Falla, F.G. Lorca) who – on the contrary – saw in *flamenco* the "soul of Andalusia", and emphasised the romantic and spiritual aspect of *flamenco*. During the era of the Franco dictatorship, however, state cultural policy preferred the alternative commercial concept of superficial joyfulness.

Wider international interest in *flamenco* was awoken in the 1950s – partly thanks to travelling *flamenco* musical-dance groups. In 1958, the Institute for Flamenco Research, ("Catédra de Flamenco"), was founded in Jerez de la Frontera; *flamenco* clubs were simultaneously founded in the bigger Spanish cities, and regional festivals and interpretation competitions started to be held.

From the 1960s, *Nuevo flamenco*, (the new flamenco), started to evolve – in which the elements of *flamenco* were associated with the elements of Western popular music, Latin-American, Arabic or African music. One of the most significant representatives of this genre is the guitar virtuoso Paco de Lucía, who, with his style of music-making – combining f. with jazz and Latin-American rhythms – has influenced *flamenco* musicians in an exceptionally strong way.

## The Main Features



In the *flamenco* genre, singing (*cante*), guitar-playing (*toque*), and dancing (*baile*) are combined. Male or female singing has been considered to be the most significant part; at the very beginning, (before the period of *café cantantes*), the vocal part was unaccompanied, or rather accompanied only by rhythmical instruments (later by castanets). Application of intervals smaller than a half-tone, enharmonic modulations, relatively narrow range (not extending the sixth), and a rhythm not subordinated to metre are characteristic for the vocal expression. Together with usage of expressive interjections and a guttural register, the singing evokes an atmosphere corresponding to the topic of the texts - intense anguish.

From the point of view of style, three forms can be distinguished in the vocal expression (and also in other musical components associated with it), the corresponding poetic forms also conform with these styles: *Cante jondo* (literally deep singing = internal), which is considered to be the oldest, based on the poetic form *siguriya* and a twelve-beat rhythmical structure; *cante intermedio* (medium) which originated by mixing *cante jondo* with Spanish folklore or popular music. *Cante chico* (small = light), which took over some elements of Latin-American music, represents a more extrovert interpreting attitude.

Vocal texts in the Andalusian dialect of Spanish occur in the form of three to five line stanzas that represent the basic skeleton - *flamenco* singers enrich this structure with variations. Some texts are anonymous, many however come from known authors (M. Machado, M. Balmaseda, G. Lorca). The most frequent topics are suffering and death, love and anguish caused by love, hope and hopelessness.... all this is reflected with fatalism and nihilism. Some songs of the *cante chico* type have a humorous topic, but there is always a tragic undertone mixed in.

Only from the period of *café cantantes* has guitar playing become the organic part of *flamenco*; various techniques are used, making the string resonate, including difficult elements in the playing of the left hand. There is a combination of arpeggios, strummed melodic passages, tremolos – played with four fingers, and also the percussive playing of rhythmical figures.

The dance component of *flamenco* has gradually developed from a rather static expression (corresponding to the original lamenting songs of the *gitanos*). Later, some Spanish folk dances penetrated into the *flamenco* sphere (e.g., *seguidilla*, *fandango*, *zarabanda*) – these have widened the scope of the *chico* style.

Apart from the forms which combine singing and dancing, there are also purely vocal formations, e.g., singing of a religious character.

Listeners assume an important role in the traditional context of *flamenco*; they play an active part in performance, not only by encouraging shouts but also by rhythmical clapping, etc. At a concert performance, this role is taken by one singer.

Although *flamenco* performers need not necessarily be *gitanos*, many of the most significant ones belong to this ethnic group (e.g. La Niña de los Peines, Ramón Montoya, and others).

## References

Serano, Juan / Elgorriaga, José (1980) *Flamenco, Body and Soul*. Fresno.



Awosusi, Anita (ed.) (1998) *Die Musik der Sinti und Roma Bd. 3. Der Flamenco* (= *Schriftenreihe des Dokumentations- und Kulturzentrums Deutscher Sinti und Roma 7*), Heidelberg.

Leblon, Bernard (2003) *Gypsies and Flamenco. The Emergence of the Art of Flamenco in Andalusia* (= *Interface Collection, Volume 6*), Hertfordshire .