

## Flamenco: Intense Emotions

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I first came across flamenco in a middle sized lecture room of Palacký University, Olomouc, Czech Republic. It was at the beginning of the school year and my roommate mentioned that their Spanish teacher would be giving flamenco lessons. I said to myself that it was worth trying and in the evening I set out for school. About forty other people had the same idea as me. Later, on a linoleum in a large lecture room, we tried to walk (it was not about dancing for many weeks) to the rhythm and style of recorded music. It was a strange music which I had never heard before. It was rhythmical, but I was not able to count the rhythm. The melody was in a major key, but from the expression of the singer I felt that he was not joyful. I didn't understand the lyrics. Our instructor Elena spoke only Spanish; someone sometimes translated a word but it didn't help. I felt confused: not only among people moving and stumbling over each other, but I was also confused inside. I was meeting a new, strange, and quite rich culture – at that time I didn't know just how rich it was – but I didn't understand it. I still can remember how I went home by tram in the evening and how I was trying to turn my wrist (the same as every other week for the next three months) and to move it like a hand of a dancer, but my hand still reminded me a cow's hoof (and I have nothing against cows).

When someone says flamenco most people outside Spain imagine mainly a Spanish dance. In your mind you can see dancers moving accompanied by the guitar, perhaps singing. It seems to be quite logical, because it was the flamenco dance which went abroad from the Kingdom of Spain more than half a century ago, and the images of beautiful Spanish girls with the look of Bizet's Carmen are also well-known. However, the art, which is called 'flamenco' nowadays, grew step by step: from singing, later accompanied by the guitar (first only to give the

first tone of a song, later on to give technically exquisite guitar parts), to dancers, who started to dance to some of the rhythms and songs. Flamenco is not only music or dance, it is part of the history which developed in the area of Spain, and it is also a life style connected with a specific culture: at least in Andalusia, the southern part of the Iberian Peninsula.

Gypsies<sup>1</sup> are considered to be the founders of flamenco. However, if they really were its only creators, how it is possible that flamenco originated in Andalusia and not somewhere where Gypsies live?

According to a document from approximately 1425, Gypsies came to Spain in the first half of the 15th century. In the document, King Alfonso V called the Noble allows Gypsies to enter the kingdom and settle there. Gypsies, who had been migrating from India since the 8th or 9th centuries, went to the Iberian Peninsula. There Muslims, Jews and Christians lived together for eight centuries, and with them, their various forms of music. At the end of the 15th century under the reign of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile Spain was re-catholicized. Muslims and Jews who refused to convert were expelled from the country and Gypsies were persecuted for their life-style. The roots of flamenco can be traced back to this period, although the term was recorded only in the 18th century. Luckily, culture cannot be banned by a law or order. Every ethnic group which lived in the area of Spain had its own music and these specifics can be found in flamenco. It is no wonder that the newly originating genre reflected features of Jewish, Muslim, Spanish, Old-Andalusia and Gypsy music.

In the genre of flamenco music we distinguish twelve rhythmical groups. Each group has its own specific rhythm and time, some of them differing in their geographical origin. These groups can be divided into three types of singing: a) basic flamenco songs (which are the oldest ones); b) derivations of fandango (which originated in the coastal town of Huelva); c) songs which developed into flamenco (such as traditional

1) I use the term Gypsies, because I take the terminology from Spanish, which doesn't have the term Romani, and uses gitanos in its place.

folk Christmas and Easter songs that came from Latin American countries, or songs, which originated in Spanish folklore). Here it is necessary to emphasise that not all rhythmical units – songs – would be accompanied by dance.

Some flamenco songs have the same structure which is familiar to us in central Europe. These songs have three, four and sometimes even more (sometimes less) stanzas of the same length, which are separated by interludes or guitar solos (so-called falsets). Stanzas can have three, four or more lines; sometimes a song includes a refrain as well. In many songs stanzas differ in length - in the number of lines. Quite often it is the singer who decides on the spot whether the stanza will continue, or a part of it will be repeated, whether the guitar player shall play solo, or the singer goes on. Similarly like in Moravian 'long drawn songs', there are flamenco songs 'without rhythm'. Rhythmical songs can be in 4/4 metre, but there can also be five, six or twelve beats.

What are the topics of flamenco songs? To simplify it: love, poverty, and death. The songs are about love for a beloved one, mother, father, and lover; about love for a town and country, about love for life in general; there are also songs about disappointment, betrayal, poverty, poor country, and death. Maybe this is why the melodies and songs are so impressive: they come from the soul of the singer, they reflect his or her feelings and moods, and what is more, they are able to capture immediately even the history of Spanish people.

The experience of a flamenco performance is usually very strong and emotional. The performance opens with a singer (usually after a guitar introduction) providing something like a painful, initial cry (*quejío*), which helps to 'set' the voice for the song which he or she is going to sing, and it also prepares the audiences for the performance. The performer often finishes a song standing, as if in a trance, with the maximum power of his or her voice, with last reserves of breath and accompanied by gestures emphasising his or her feelings. After such a performance, observers or listeners either don't believe their eyes or they let themselves be in the same trance as the artist.

Such a trance is called *duende* in Spanish. In it the performer, singer or dancer, forgets everything and everyone around: he is driven to play the guitar enthusiastically, or to stamp to the rhythm or to sing a song; it is the moment when he lives only for his song, or better to say inside his song, and he and his song become a single unit. The Spanish Academic Dictionary defines *duende* as an indescribably mysterious enchantment. In 1933 at a conference in Argentina, Federico García Lorca described *duende* as “something which comes from inside, not from outside like the muse and the angel, something that pushes you forward and overpowers you from inside at the same time”,<sup>2</sup> (Esteban, 2007, 25).

Flamenco songs have a strange (I don't say unique) power to attract the listeners with their melodies and lyrics. How can you possibly not feel sympathy for a miner from the following story? (For translation I preferred accuracy than poetic fluency.)

“Cante de las minas”

*To los días de mi vía  
son nublaitos pa mí  
que en la oscura galería  
mi sol se llama candil  
y me fe la luz del día.*

*Me estoy jugando la vía  
trabajando de minero.  
Vivo y muero día a día  
porque es la muerte el barreno  
que me hace compañía.*

*La muerte vino a la mina  
con su disfraz de barreno;  
se fue por la galeía*

*acechando a los mineros  
que se jugaban la vía. (...)*

- 2) In the Spanish original “Algo que sale de dentro, que no viene de fuera, como la musa o el ángel, algo que te impulsa y te subyuga desde los adentros”.

*Golpe a golpe voy sacando  
de la tierra el mineral  
y día a día quemando  
mi salú y me libertad  
por eso canto llorando.*  
(Rincón, 2005, 32–35).

“Miner’s song”  
Every day of my life  
Is like a cloud for me  
On the dark road  
A candle is my sun  
Daylight is my belief.  
  
I play with my life  
When working as a miner.  
I live and die day by day  
Death and explosive  
Are my fellows.

Death came to the mine  
In the mask of explosive  
It left through a tunnel  
Where it is waiting for miners  
Who are playing with their lives. [...]

Knock by knock I dig for  
Minerals in the ground  
And day by day I regret  
My health and my freedom  
So I sing crying.

Or on the other hand, would it be possible not to be happy when someone sings “Don’t be sad!”? Would it be possible not to feel the love of a man who declares his love by a song? The following song is in the *alegrías* rhythm (*alegre* means joyful, merry, vivid.).

“Un clavel mañanero (*Alegrías*)”

*Es un clavel mañanero  
la cara de mi gitana  
que es un clavel mañanero  
cuando asoma a la ventana  
yo del aire siento celos*

*Tengo el corazon perdio  
por ti mi rosa temprana  
tengo el corazon perdio  
un dia mu de mañana  
yo entre en tu jardin florio*

*Cuando mueve la brisa  
tu negro pelo  
te digo mu bajito  
cuanto te quiero*

“Morning clove-pink” (*alegrías*)

Like a clove-pink in the morning  
Is the face of my Gypsy girl  
Like a morning clove-pink  
When she looks out of the window  
I am jealous of the air.

I have lost my heart  
To my morning rose  
I have lost my heart  
One day early morning  
When I entered your flower garden

When breeze is combing  
Your black hair  
I'll say silently  
How much I love you

Flamenco is full of emotions. They touch not only the singers, musicians and dancers, but also the audience: regardless of their age, sex or profession. We might not start learning Spanish because of flamenco. We might not dance flamenco. But maybe...we might try to open the doors of our souls to emotions.

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