



“Flamenco as an art is constantly changing”

IAN DAVIES

in conversation with John Duarte

Ian Davies achieved the distinction, remarkable for an Englishman, of becoming one of the very top flamenco guitarists in Spain, and of working all over the world with first-class Spanish ballet companies. His background and some aspects of his present thinking were well covered in his interview with Paul Magnussen (GI, September 1985). In this later conversation with John Duarte he discusses other aspects, interesting to those whose knowledge of flamenco is less than profound, but who might like to understand some of its basics a little better.

The *tablaó* (Café de Chinitos) in which Ian gained invaluable experience for three and a half years is both a high-class restaurant (defined in Spain as a ‘four-fork’ establishment) and the flamenco equivalent of a jazz club, a place where all the finest artists perform. To what extent is improvisation, a *sine qua non* in jazz, a part of the art of flamenco? “With flamenco concert guitar music there is very little improvisation but when it comes to accompanying dancers or singers it is mainly improvised—within very strict laws. You can’t bring in ‘jazzy’ tricks with a traditional singer because he just won’t be able to sing, he’ll get up and walk away”. So flamenco guitarists ‘compose’ and juxtapose their own *falsetas* (variations) and practise them at home. But do they remain the same, or do they change over a period of time? “They can, but not necessarily. I can think of many cases where a piece has been ‘crystallised’ and ten years later it’s still in its original form. If a guitarist wanted to put together a different *seguidilla*, for instance, he’d leave the first one as a separate composition and begin a completely new one”. This is entirely different from the approach of a jazz musician, who, under normal circumstances, treats every improvisation

as a spontaneous, one-off creation, never consciously to be repeated.

Improvisation most often requires a basic framework within which to work—roughly fixed in jazz as an harmonic progression, and free within the limits of the time-signature. How about flamenco? “There are harmonic frameworks but they are becoming looser and looser, which is a problem: certain pieces now played by some guitarists would not be accepted as being ‘true flamenco’—rather like some other form of music—because they have broken the rules”. We will come back to that matter later, but for now, how about the rhythmic aspects? One hears a great deal about the *compas*, the beat—or accent-structure. “A great deal of flamenco is in 3/4 time (though there is a lot in 4/4 or 6/8, for instance) but the *compas* represents a 12-beat sequence, with accents on 3, 6, 8, 10 and 12”. But if we think of these ‘beats’ as being quavers, either we have two bars, each with six, or one with 12 beats (a ‘beat’ does not quite correspond to the general musical meaning of the word)—a bar of something like 12/8! “Yes, when it’s put down on paper it becomes very confusing. Different methods have been tried and some people have actually made a bar of 12/8 of it, putting little accent marks in. It’s a type of music where you do far better forgetting all this counting; it’s much better to learn it by ear. We ‘in the west’ have a natural sense of 4/4 time and if you get a bar of 5/4 in it you know it’s not right; best of all is to build a sense of this *compas* rhythm into your body and forget about counting. What’s more, when you get to a higher level you realise the inadequacy of the 3/6/8/10/12 accenting; you don’t *always* accent those beats, because a lot of what you’re playing is counterpoint, running in and out of the accents—but that’s getting rather profoundly into this question”. But one does hear a lot

about *compas*, the key that unlocks the door to flamenco. "Too much emphasis is placed on it out of Spain; it really annoys me when I hear people criticising a Spanish professional flamenco guitarist and saying that 'he has good *compas*' or 'he never goes out of *compas*'. Of course he doesn't—these people have learned it before they've learned a note on their instrument. They've been hearing it since they were born, if they come from a flamenco family, which most of them do, and if they didn't have it they wouldn't work anywhere. There's very little talk of *compas* in Spain, where they have to try to learn it after trying to learn their instruments!". The beat-structure of 3/6/8/10/12 seems to correspond with a bar of 6/8, followed by one of 3/4—two times three, then three times two (a sort of hemiola), but the accents come at the ends of the groups (of three or two)! "Exactly. That's very important. The melody starts on 1 but the accent comes on 3. This is a common fault with a flamenco student: instead of accenting 3 and 6 he accents 1 and 4, turning it into a waltz, and he's unaware that he's turned it upside down. Then it's finished off with 7/8/9/10 and the 11/12 is really a lead into the next ten beats. To finish, you must end on 10—if you go on to 11/12 then you must continue. It's because of unwritten laws like this that improvisation seems so complicated, but for the initiated it's very easy. Certain signals are given by the dancer, by the sound of the foot-work, which tell you whether he's going to finish or continue—there are even signs in the arms that tell you, but that's becoming very involved."

Many years ago, Segovia told me that *real* flamenco was played by the peasants, who came in from the fields with soil under their fingernails and who didn't have the virtuosic technique now used by flamenco concert players. "Yes, he's correct; I understand his point of view. But flamenco has changed, though his opinion hasn't. What about those technical changes? "The flamenco guitar has evolved and we've adopted some things from classical guitar technique and incorporated them into our playing of flamenco. The players at the beginning of this century lacked technique, apart from strumming and the use of the (right-hand) thumb; they didn't know how to play an arpeggio or a tremolo". So where did they learn their tremolo—from Tárrega? "Yes, it has filtered through from the classic guitar. There are today many brilliant players who *still* can't play a tremolo or an arpeggio with three fingers—but who play very good and very moving flamenco". Still with technique, how highly is tone-quality



Photo: George Clinton.

valued, or is the percussive impact more important? "It's more important than it was. At one time it was basically a percussive exercise for some players. But, to take an example, Ramon Montoya was such a lyrical player and, considering that he was a *flamenco* guitarist and remembering the state the flamenco guitar was in then, he had good tone as well. That's one way of playing that has led up to today's styles". Tone has become more important, but *how* important is it? "The main thing is that it should sound 'flamenco'. What does that mean, and who is to judge? The top professionals are virtually the only people who really understand the music and can pass sensible judgements on it. If it moves them then it's good flamenco, and that is more important than tone-quality—but if you can have that and tone, then that is the line to follow today". Apart from quality of tone, classic guitarists aim at a variety of it; how about flamenco guitarists? "Today, a more sophisticated variety of tone is used, but of course it's only the better players who worry about that. There are only a very few of that kind of player, which is why they can be accepted as concert-flamenco artists, not just run-of-the-mill accompanists—no matter how good they may be. They may play very good flamenco but it's not of the concert standard expected today".

It is not only in technique that flamenco has changed, it seems to be changing musically, too, absorbing influences from other kinds of music, especially popular music. The 'unwritten rules' such as those relating to *compas* still hold good, but how far can flamenco change before it ceases to be the traditional 'folk' art it is said to be, and becomes a second-class member of another musical family? Is flamenco in a dead-end tunnel? "If you're thinking of folk music and you're thinking of the 'folk' of the 19th century, especially the singing, singers have always followed the style of the beginning of *this* century, so that's 'folk' music—they picked it up from the people before them. The moment the majority of flamenco artists start playing this hybrid kind of thing, that's going to be the folk music of the 1980s—and the next century will have to look back at it as being real flamenco music. You can only push it so far and it's a question of who decides when you've passed the barrier. Everyone has incorporated influences from other musics but the cadence, say the Phrygian cadence, is still there. There is a difference between flamenco and Spanish folk music but the Phrygian mode is only in flamenco, you're not going to find it in the rest of Spain. You find so many kinds of folk music because Spain was made up of so many different kingdoms. There are more non-Andalusian styles of Spanish folk music that most people never hear of; some of it is Celtic and some dances from up north considerably resemble Scottish dancing. The Phrygian mode was brought by the arabs and it was Andalusia, in the south, that they had the strongest influence". Flamenco as an art is constantly changing, but how far back does it go? "The earliest record we have is of a singer, Tio Luis de Juliana, dating—I think—from about 1780. He didn't invent it—it would have been passed down to him, so it must have existed before that. The trouble is that very little in the way of written records has survived".

It has been said that flamenco is like a tripod, it is only complete when it has three legs: singing, dancing and

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playing. "No, it doesn't have to be like that. You can have good, authentic flamenco on a single guitar, or—and this may sound strange, even with a solo dancer on a bare floor, maybe with bare feet, and with no singing or playing. You can certainly have a single voice (and originally it was this). It's nice to have all three elements working together but it's not essential". How long, then, has the flamenco solo guitar existed? "I'd estimate, only since flamenco became a commercial proposition, when the taverns appeared maybe in the late 19th century—in Spain they were called *cafés cantandos*, in France they were *cafés chantants*. They put gypsies on the stage to let the wealthy have a look at the spectacle. Since that existed there was a market for a guitarist to play some of this 'gypsy' music—as it's called by many people, though it isn't *totally* gypsy music". Before that, then, the guitar was simply an adjunct to the song or dance? "Yes, especially the song, the essential part of it. Everything developed from the solo voice; the guitar came in just to give a little rhythmic backing, the occasional harmonic support of a strummed chord, an accent, or just the termination of a phrase—to inspire the singer".

Beyond its geographical centre in Andalusia, is it possible

to define 'flamenco'? "You can't put it into words. It's like what Louis Armstrong said when he was asked that question about jazz: 'If you've got it, you don't need to ask about it'. It's 'Spanish blues', though I wouldn't go so far as to say it's a form of jazz; it's becoming rather like it but it's not as free". Back to the unwritten laws.

Ian Davies left the *tablaó* because he wanted to gain experience of other areas of Spanish folklore than that of Andalusia. Now he has returned to England because, having learned the trade of a *tablaó* guitarist, and reached the top of the tree in Spanish ballet work, he wants a fresh challenge: "That's all there was". That can come only through a developing career as a concert soloist, one that is very hard to follow in Spain without compromising ones art and 'going pop'—and few invitations from abroad now reach Spanish-based soloists. One way in which he is seeking to develop his audience is through playing mixed programmes of 'classical' and flamenco music, as he did in the Wigmore Hall last year. His premiss was that a programme of this kind might attract people who would not have felt inclined to go to a whole evening of either one of these kinds of music; there was some evidence that this in fact happened. Isn't it difficult to 'change gear' halfway through, technically for instance? "Today's sophisticated flamenco guitar requires, in the right hand for instance, a wide variety of techniques, with different qualities of sound and effect. The 'classical' is a part of the variety I already use in flamenco playing, so I don't consciously separate the two—I certainly don't change my hand position; all I aim for is the sound in my ear. You could say I'm using my flamenco technique to play classical music, and *vice versa*. What, then, about the aesthetic, musical difference? "Falla, for instance, mixes the flamenco and classical idioms, just as modern flamenco is a hybrid with jazz. Or maybe the composer intends to imitate flamenco on the piano: *Rumores de la Caleta* is an example of this and obviously my approach to it differs from that of a classical guitarist... the attack, which I think suits this particular piece. I tend to stick to the 'romance'-romantic band of music, not too far removed from the spirit of flamenco; perhaps there is other music I've heard played by other people but it hasn't said 'Play me!' to me. It sorts itself out in that natural fashion".

Ian Davies has turned his back on the security and fame he enjoyed in Spain, to travel along a new road; he deserves to be offered stopping places along it, where his message can be heard.

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