"SABICAS IN LONDON"

by Ivor Mairants

O see and hear Sabicas on the concert platform is to experience icy clear perfection of technique played by a cool calm master of his art.

I have seen and heard flamenco

I have seen and heard flamenco players who are generally accepted as the best in their profession ranging from the ages of over 60 to under 20, and I would say that in my 13 years or so of interest and study of flamenco guitar, I have not seen or heard the equal of Sabicas' perfection of technical co-ordination.

This includes "picados" (runs), tremolo and rasgueados (four finger rolls), and by four finger rasgueados I mean a continuous uninterrupted roll across the strings by a repetition of movement of the fingers from the little to the forefinger, unaided by the thumb or a twist from the wrist.

Emotionally, however, the opening cadenzas of "Granadinas" left me disappointed because of the thin guitar sound and the somewhat untraditional form. On disc his tone is fuller and the top strings have a thicker dimension and one had to attune oneself in the concert hall to the smaller all-round dimension of sound.

The Farruca, which was very elaborate and somewhat removed from the traditional form, explored the higher reaches of the fingerboard in many novel *falsetas* but left me unmoved, and it was not until the Soleares which followed that I began to warm

up to some familiar flamenco melodies. Then followed a medley which included a Sorongo and "Los Quatros Muleros", the latter in almost classical form, but an excellent arrangement.

The "Tientos" was rather light and the last piece of the first set, "Inspiration—New Form of Flamenco Expression", turned out to be a cross between a Colombiana and a rhumba flamenco, which was very exciting.

The second set opened with a Rondeña style composition although the programme said "Taranto", followed by an Alegrias which was a sparkling delightful exposition—a sort of "all things bright and beautiful".

I think the "Malagueña, the next offering, was a commercial sop to the masses who expect to hear the familiar E, G‡, B/E, G‡, B/A, C, B/A, G, F/ and so on, but the "Fandango de Huelva" which followed was an absolutely masterly piece of flamenco music played with the calm ease of technical co-ordination. Beautiful to watch as well as exciting to hear.

The "Danza Mora" (Arabia) contained everything it should have done and I think that even "Ziryab" (the founder and teacher of Arabian music, said to have played for Haroun el Raschid) would have been satisfied. The last selection before the main interval was the "Siguirillas y Saetas".

The "Siguirillas" or "Seguiriyas" was not quite traditional and rather fast but had so many wonderful

falsetas and opened such new roads for ideas that, for me, and I am sure for flamenco players in the audience, it was something to soak in for future consideration.

Although there were only four pieces mentioned in the set after the interval, Sabicas played five encores including a really suitable and terrific arrangement of Lecuona's "Malagueña".

He played a Zapateado which was both tasteful and sophisticated. Let me explain that usually when the vamp is played it can sound very corny. The type of vamp that makes me think of the music-hall comedian saying "A funny thing happened to me on the way to the theatre", but in this instance no such thought entered my mind.

Sophisticated

The non-flamenco pieces such as the Inca Dance and the Spanish Military March were acceptable because they were not overdone and when he announced the "Garrotin" both my wife and daughter were thrilled because they love the opening melody of descending semitones of A/A_b , G, G_b , F/ landing on to E with a chord of C continuing with G/G_b , F, E, $E_b/$ landing on D followed by a chord of G.7 etc.

This melody never did emerge. The arrangement was extremely sophisticated and, of course, there was no doubt about it being a Garrotin, but in my opinion the basic melodic introduction and ending should not have been excluded.

Sabicas had a wonderful ovation and well deserved it. He played a Ramirez guitar although two other makes of guitar were mentioned in the programme.

Speaking to Sabicas in London he told me that one of his most grateful memories is that Segovia, who is in no way an *aficionado* of the flamenco guitar, enjoyed his performance when he played for him. It is typical of this modest flamenco genius that Segovia's opinion means so much to him.

Sabicas, who now lives in New York, claims he is completely self-taught and by self-taught he also means self-critical and self-disciplined.

He is in his prime of technical perfection, makes the guitar not only sound brilliant but his hand movements look beautifully co-ordinated.



PACO PEÑA, SABICAS and IVOR MAIRANTS. Sabicas (Agustin Castellon) was born in Pamplona in the province of Navarra not far from San Sebastian. (Pamplona, you may remember, was popularised by Ernest Hemingway in his bull-fighting novel "Death in the Afternoon".)

A guitar in the house and an uncle who could play a couple of chords attracted young Sabicas and at the age of five, he began to play the instrument. So much so, that at the age of 8, wearing school uniform, he made his public debut in a local theatre following a military ceremony by the local troops of the swearing of allegiance to the Patria (country). Besides playing solo guitar he accompanied a yound soldier who sang flamenco.

At the age of 11 while still a schoolboy in Madrid, he won a cup for being the best guitarist at the Monumental Cinema, Madrid. Sabicas adds that really he won the competition because of his size and age, which is just a measure of his modesty.

Brush-off

He learnt by watching, listening and inventing variations that developed his melodic and technical scope. Of course, he played the new developments whenever he performed and when the older players copied them and passed them off as their own, Sabicas protested. He was, nevertheless, given the brush-off while the older players were believed; and to this day, says Sabicas, some of his original themes have been credited to these players.

To-day, 40 or so long-playing records later, his flamenco variations are known to the world and, as he says "everybody is welcome to copy them"—and everybody does and has been doing so ever since

been doing so ever since. He left Spain some 30 years ago, and has lived in Mexico and the United States. He has accompanied the world's greatest flamenco artists and his LP with Carmen Amaya is really a wild feast of flamenco. It is interesting to note that while in Mexico 25 years ago, he gave what may have been the first solo recital of flamenco music on the concert platform. I broached the subject of concert flamenco playing compared to the complete amalgam of singing, playing and dancing. He said: "It is 'un otra cosa' (another thing), a thing apart. When playing for singing and dancing, you play short themes which intermingle with the singing or dancing and the guitar is

then just an ingredient in the whole. When you play apart from singing and dancing, you can develop the themes both in length and variety."

Discussing what I termed "traditional" flamenco and the highly technical fireworks heard today, we got into rather deep water and to the best of my ability I think this is how he sees it.

He considers what he plays true flamenco, or "flamenco puro" which he develops by adding new melodies, extended runs and rhythms, yet adhering to traditional harmony and form. He leaves the more extraneous harmonies unconnected with flamenco, to the serious composers.

Sabicas holds his guitar in a way which is unconventional in flamenco or in classical playing. He sits with his left foot on a foot-stall adjusted to its highest level with the lower bout of the guitar resting on his right thigh and the shoulder on the raised left thigh. He says that this position enables his left hand to move more easily and firmly up the fingerboard, as for example, in the "Fandango de Huelva" concerning which I had mentioned his complete

ease of execution.

He astounded me by saying that it was quite a difficult piece for him to play. He certainly had me fooled!

His right hand position is completely steady and relaxed in the best classical manner and this is so because of the strict self-discipline which he imposes upon himself enabling him to produce the strongest sound with the least hand movement. In fact, the most important single factor of right hand development is to keep it steady and this comes only with much practice and a study of one's own faults.

He considers that the minimum practice time per day should be two hours in the morning and two hours in the evening. He admits, nevertheless, that he sometimes forgets to practice!

Controlled strength

When I told him how disappointed some of us were at the recital because he had not included the introductory theme in the "Garrotin", he answered that there was not really very much variety in the "Garrotin" so he invented the theme which I mentioned and began and ended the piece with it (and this had become part of the "Garrotin"), but on that occasion had changed it and played something else. However, at his next concert he would

include it specially for us.

Today, he said, technique is improving all the time, but even so 95 per cent of the players have not yet developed sufficient controlled strength of the hands.

"Interest in the flamenco guitar" says Sabicas "is increasing every day and the virtuosity of the players is improving in tone and technique". When I asked him about the young players of today, he said that although there are many good ones he has not had the opportunity of hearing them. Furthermore, when they do play for him, they are somewhat nervous and he does not hear them at their best. Nevertheless, he did single out Serranito, Paco de Lucia and Manual Cano.

I must thank Paco Peña who not only interpreted for me but who was able to transmit my technical questioning in a way only a dedicated guitarist could have done, and, of course, convey to me the true sense of Sabicas' answers which he gave with sincerity and great patience.

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