Flamenco Guitar Innovation and the Circumscription of Tradition

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Music

by

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Flamenco Guitar Innovation and the Circumscription of Tradition

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Despite my indebtedness to these individuals, I retain the sole responsibility for the information contained within this work. My conclusions are based on my own understandings, which I hope accurately reflect the words of my consultants (I use this term rather than the usual “informants” or “interviewees” to distinguish those I interviewed) and the insights of the many authors who informed my work.

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ABSTRACT

Flamenco Guitar Innovation and the Circumscription of Tradition

by

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Flamenco is a gitano-Andalúz art form belonging to the gitanos (gypsies) of southern Spain or Andalusia. Over the centuries, it has matured into an art form that combines tradition with improvisation resulting in a genre in which creativity is valued and encouraged. Simultaneously, strict guidelines to “tradition” must be followed.

In the late 1960's, amid controversy, a new musical school fusing traditional flamenco with outside influences was pioneered. Labeled flamenco nuevo (new), neo-flamenco, or fusion, it disrupted centuries of practice by radicalizing the tradition and created a tense polarity within the flamenco community between so-called “traditionalists” and “fusionists.”

Neo-flamenco emerged in a seemingly innocuous manner through rejection of the traditional manner of positioning the flamenco guitar. Spain’s premier flamenco guitarist, Paco de Lucía forged a manner of positioning the guitar that was controversial initially, but has since been embraced by traditional and neo-flamenco guitarists alike. This is extraordinary given that the traditional position is both
difficult to master and was considered an important defining characteristic of flamenco practice. Given this paradox, this research asks, “Why did the shift occur? Why did traditionalists modernize? What social forces led to such sweeping change?”

This study analyzes the circumstances and implications of the postural shift. It investigates the process of when, why, and how a standard performance becomes obsolete and explores the forces that come into play during such a transition. It sheds light on the processes of modernization and the connection between socio-cultural movements and the construction of tradition.

Analysis of historical frameworks, interviews, documentation, and visual data reveal that the postural shift was connected to socio-cultural movements that were reflected in the emerging range of “acceptable” flamenco playing postures. Such a shift demonstrates that tradition is malleable in the hands of innovators and the potential speediness of change in music. Creative epochs within a society are led by individual innovators, but revolutions require the acceptance of peers, communities and regimes. The confluence of such factors is reflected in this study and provide a lens to understanding this process more fully.
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I. INTRODUCTION, METHODS AND ORIENTATION

Flamenco is a *gitano-Andalúz*\(^1\) art form belonging to a clearly defined people and place, the *gitanos* (gypsies) of southern Spain (Andalusia). Flamenco is found in three primary expressions: *cante* (song), *baile* (dance), and *guitarra* (guitar). While conflicting histories abound, much of what is known about flamenco dates mainly from the 18\(^\text{th}\) century (Washabaugh 1998:31-53). Over the centuries, flamenco has evolved to signify both a way of life and a folk music of a highly organized and tightly structured nature. It has matured into an art form that combines tradition with improvisation resulting in a genre in which creativity is valued and encouraged; at the same time, strict guidelines to “tradition” must be followed. As a folk-art, the complexity and sophistication of flamenco have been passed down from generation to generation by direct imitation for most of its history. Throughout that history, many aficionados look back to the flamenco of an earlier generation for an ideal of purity and force of expression. This pattern is not just a modern one, as described by many writers on the subject over the past century (Washabaugh 1998:35; George 1969:47).

In the late 1960’s, amid controversy, a new musical school fusing traditional flamenco with outside influences (such as pop, jazz and salsa) was pioneered. This new form has been labeled Flamenco *nuevo*\(^2\) (new), neo-flamenco (Schreiner

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\(^1\) The spelling *Andalúz* is reflective of the pronunciation used in Andalusia (spelled Andalucia in Spanish) in many flamenco publications. The phonetic pronunciation is *And-a-luth*

\(^2\) Commonly used terms. See also (Calvo 1994; Rodgers 1999).
1990:25), or “fusion” It has been viewed as a “musical movement that has thrown into turmoil one of Europe's most potent musical forms” (Llewellyn 1993:39). Neo-flamenco can be an element of fusion or stand on its own (Durbin 2001:1). As its name suggests, neo-flamenco stands in opposition to the more conservative “old school flamenco,” aficionados of which hold a nostalgic sense of allegiance to “pure” flamenco (Valdo 1999:38; Malefyt 1997:3). The nuevo flamenco movement continues to evolve with infusions of rock, blues, disco, Brazilian samba, rap, reggae, as well as diverse Arabo-Andalusian, Indian, Malian, Senegalese and North African musics. Many non-indigenous new performers and fans have embraced this expanding and evolving tradition as musicians from Spain and elsewhere use every opportunity to challenge the boundaries of what can permissibly still be considered flamenco. Fusion and neo-flamenco distills flamenco which means that structure, dance, song and guitar subcategories often are blurred (Durbin 1991:1). According to some reports, the neo-flamenco movement has initiated more changes in flamenco during the past two decades than in its entire history (Valdo 1999; Grande 1986; Molina 1992:7; Llewellyn 1993:39). Not surprisingly, this disruption to the tradition has created a tense polarity within the flamenco community as so called “traditionalists” struggle to preserve “purity” while “fusionists” challenge the boundaries of flamenco.

The neo-flamenco era was birthed in a seemingly innocuous manner with the

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3 Schreiner also makes note that “These departures have been variously called, flamenco-rock, flamenco-jazzrock, classic-flamenco, etc. and are part of a larger, widespread trend called "fusion..."
rejection of the traditional manner of positioning the flamenco guitar. Spain's premier flamenco guitarist, Paco de Lucía, introduced a new manner of positioning the guitar. The modern position was initially controversial but has since been embraced by traditional and modern neo-flamenco guitarists alike. Such a development is extraordinary given that historically, the traditional vertical manner in which the flamenco guitarist positions the instrument is both difficult to master and was considered an important defining characteristic of flamenco practice. Given such a paradox, this research asks, “Why did the shift occur? Why did traditionalists modernize? Specifically, what social forces led to such sweeping change?”

This study analyzes the context, timing, and significance of the postural shift. It investigates the process of when, why and how a standard performance becomes old, outdated, and obsolete, and explores the forces that come into play during such a transition. At the same time, it sheds light on the processes of modernization and the connection between socio-cultural movements and the construction of tradition. This study is premised on the fact that postural shifts have occurred on other instruments over a period of time, but it is difficult to know with certainty exactly how these changes were initiated, particularly because they are linked to the music, instruments, culture, and players of another period of history.

Examining wherefore de Lucía’s guitar position was widely accepted in less than a decade, by such a diverse strata of guitarists and aficionados from different schools of thought, affords a unique opportunity to glimpse “tradition” in the making of music” (1990:132). See also Washabaugh 1996.
and systematically explore the mechanisms that bring it into being.

A. Background, Significance, Methodology and Design

In an ethnomusicological context, there are many ways of exploring music. Examining a widespread modification in the instrumentalist’s playing position is not merely a visual curiosity. Focusing on the body and examining shared corporal transpositions within a tradition can be a powerful means for understanding culture. Csordas (1990) argues that “the body is not an object to be studied [apart or] simply in relation to culture, but the body can be considered the subject of culture” (Csordas 1990:5). Urban concludes, “Social relations are not just, or even primarily a matter of consciousness. They are first and foremost felt or sensed relations” (Urban 1991:145). These “felt or sensed relations” are articulated in our manner of sitting, speaking, walking, grouping, and interacting with others (Washabaugh 1996).

Examining issues of corporality may be particularly significant in regards to flamenco. It has been said that flamenco can be understood as “an evocation of the body, [a] style that is undeniably physical and incontrovertibly corporal” (Washabaugh 1996:88). In his examination of cante flamenco, Washabaugh discovers that “bodies occupy a central rather than a marginal place in cante” (Washabaugh 1996:101). He concludes that existing scholarship fails to account for this physicality and instead “one discovers a corporality that is conventionally consigned to the margins of musical experience” (Washabaugh 1996:101). Other authors agree that “the body is the point of reference for emotional and cathartic...
experience in flamenco performance” (Malefyt 1997:174). People construct their reality by defining physical experiences and through examining the body in performance; we can understand “how a people construct social and political boundaries” (Malefyt 1997:173). These recent explorations into aspects of physicality and the flamenco tradition have been limited to baile and cante, with no attention yet given to the guitar.

1. Tradition and Innovation: Positioning the Flamenco Guitar

The traditional flamenco position for holding the guitar is to support its weight on the right thigh (Figure 1.0). With both feet planted firmly on the ground, the guitar is balanced on the right thigh, extending diagonally across the body upwards from right to left. The body of the guitar is held in place by the pressure of the upper right arm, and the right forearm extends downward to the guitar strings.

Traditional Posture Juan Martin (Figure 1.0)

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The angle at which the guitar is held varies slightly depending on individual preference, yet in all cases, an angle is maintained and the weight of the guitar is supported on one thigh (Figure 1.0).

The contemporary position that de Lucía introduced places the instrument almost parallel to the ground (Figure 1.1). The right leg is crossed and right ankle resting on the left knee, leaving only one foot touching the ground. The weight of the guitar rests on the inside curve.

2. Other Shifts

The repositioning of an instrument has occurred in other periods, and with various musical instruments and genres. These postural changes have been studied

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4 Martin 1978:5
5 Classical guitarists also hold the guitar at an angle. The angle is often achieved through raising the left leg with different aids (i.e. footstool). The “classical” position is not suitable for flamenco” (Martin 1978:3).
6 Guitarist and teacher Juan Martín suggests that beginners may also cradle the guitar between the legs almost vertical to the ground (Martin 1978: 4).
to varying degrees within classical scholarship. For example, it is commonly
accepted that until the early Baroque period (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries), the
violin was held to the breast while being played (Reinhard 1993; Sherman 1997;
Watkins 1994). Yet, by the early Classical period (end of the eighteenth century),
the violin was held under the chin on the shoulder. A similar change occurred with
the cello as the Baroque instrument was held by creating a diamond shape with one’s
legs, then resting the cello on the sides of the calves. Yet, the modern cello rests on
the floor on an endpin, bringing the cello higher against the body and creating a
different angle in relation to the player.

There are many plausible explanations for these and other postural
transitions. One author describes Thomas Baltzar (1630-1663) who in 1655
“attracted attention with his new way of holding the violin under his chin” (Reinhard
1993:276). This position reportedly permitted Baltzar to play in “the highest
positions then possible” and enhanced his “skillful use of double stops, and bowing
technique” (Reinhard 1993:276). The cello endpin has been viewed as an
evolutionary necessity that “definitely makes the instrument louder and also easier⁸
and more stable” (Bylsma⁹ in Sherman 1997:218). The cello endpin and holding the
violin under the chin have variously been attributed to physical changes in the

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⁸ The larger context of the interview suggests that the “easier” suggests “easier to hold” and “easier to
play.” It is “easier” to play the instrument when it rests on the floor rather than having to grip it with
the legs.
⁹ Sony recording artist Anner Bylsma is a Dutch cellist, 1959 winner of the Pablo Casals Competition
who “is equally comfortable on period and modern instruments”
<www.sonyclassical.com/artists/bylsma/bio.html>
instrument (Reinhard 1993), a need to free up the left hand (Sherman 1997), or as an aid to intonation and the development of the vibrato technique (Watkins 1994).

It has been said that “[t]echnical changes are never only technical” but are linked to a much larger and more complex cultural picture (Bylsma in Sherman 1997:218). Musical change is often examined from a historiographical perspective looking back in time. Linking compositions and performance practices of the past to those of the present has been likened to “tracing an imaginary journey through a one-way street” which has been under continual scrutiny since the 1980s (Lawson and Stowell 1999:151). Scholars of early music use primary sources such as iconography, historical archives, instrumental and theoretical treatises to surviving instruments, journals, letters, diaries, catalogues and literature. They provide invaluable information for building a picture of past musical practices, however, attempts to retrieve the past presents challenges (Ibid.).

François-Joseph Fetis suggested that contemporary performance practices did not necessarily suit music from earlier times (Lawson and Stowell 1999). He presented “historical concerts” in Paris as early as 1832, in an attempt to “view older music in terms of its original period rather than transplanting it to the present” (Lawson and Stowell 1999:4). O’Dea, in his book *Virtue or Virtuosity? Explorations in the Ethics of Musical Performance* (2000) comments:

No change has more profoundly influenced musical interpretation during the last two decades than the growth of the historical performance movement. The search for original methods and styles of performance has revolutionized not only our listening habits but also our whole approach to the question of repertory and tradition (O’Dea 2000:67).
Documenting and analyzing the “how” and “why” of this contemporary postural shift can help us to understand shifts on other instruments and musical genres as well as aid in the prediction of future postural shifts. An instrumentalists posture can shape and reflect prevailing social attitudes and cultural practices. Viewed in this manner, landmark changes on an instrument, such as de Lucia’s postural shift, can be understood as indicators of changing attitudes about conditions in society and through study of such patterns, we can identify sources and undercurrents of social change.

3. Questions Posed

A dramatic repositioning of the instrument by all performers opens many avenues for exploration. Some of the questions posed in the subsequent chapters include the following queries, which may be grouped by the themes of modernization processes, motivation and socio-cultural context.

*Modernization processes*

When and why do traditionalists modernize and how far are they willing to go? What are the motivating factors for modernization? Does the impetus for such modernization arise from forces inside or outside the tradition, or both? Are there one or many acceptable playing postures? How long has this been the case? How is a new playing posture canonized and when is it accepted as permanent? Is such a change the result of one person’s pioneering work, or an entire paradigm shift? How have guitarists who are considered “purists” and who advocate a return to the “traditional” been met within purist circles? Are the musicians, composers, scholars,
and audiences living through such musical changes conscious of the process of change and modernization?

**Motivation**

Is the repositioning of an instrument based on a desire for greater technical mastery? Is the change rooted in a player’s desire to affect tone projection, tone quality, technique or emotionality? Has the availability of wood, or changes in instrument manufacture substantially changed the weight or balance of the instrument and so necessitated a postural change? What was/is the impetus for guitarists, already accustomed to the “traditional” position to learn and master a new playing position? Why have a very small number of guitarists not changed? Has this re-positioning the guitar opened up new technical possibilities on the instrument? Did it render useless others?

**Socio cultural context**

Is this shift connected to socio-cultural movements? Is the shift connected/affected or a result of the forces of globalization upon the flamenco tradition? Is the postural change in flamenco still in process, or has it been completed?

These are some of the questions explored in this research. The aim of this study is not to offer a history or a thorough survey of flamenco or the works of Paco de Lucía, but instead to explore the forces of change in their interplay with tradition to determine what constitutes the meeting point between “old” and “new” in flamenco music.
4. Methodology

This study addresses issues of corporality and musical change by allowing a variety of voices to be heard in a contemporary setting while tradition is still “in the making.” I examine the discourse about contemporary flamenco performance practice and examine the processes that have characterized the modernization of Spain as well as the contradictory cultural practices of Andalusia, the area of Spain from which flamenco originates.

In addition to interviewing and interacting with a broad spectrum of people associated with the postural change, as a flamenco guitarist, I experienced the postural shift firsthand. It is rare to have had the opportunity to experience such a change as well as to study it. This study views the story behind the change—the people involved and events leading up to and following the change. In doing so, the study identifies musicians, journalists, aficionados, and presenters who played central roles in constructing the change. It chronicles historical developments in international music that made the change possible. Finally, the study shows that news media coverage of flamenco and the global-wide music and guitar movements all are critical to understanding the narrative and change.

The complexity of ethnographic work requires developing a meaningful and yet somewhat distant relationship with consultants. The method of data collection in this research includes interviews in combination with participant observation. An ethnographic approach has been combined with cultural studies theory. A semi-reflexive methodology has been used to interpret the findings.
To develop an understanding of this change, this study relied on multiple data sources taken from three source domains: interviews, direct observation/participation and, written/recorded documents. Information from these sources allowed me to: a) identify the people who were central in initiating and sustaining the positional change; b) chronicle the change; and c) identify and compare prominent claims and discourse about the change. I consulted the large body of literature related to this topic, including: biographies, guitar methods, and scholarship devoted to classification and description, history and origins, and socio-cultural approaches on flamenco.

The ethnomusicological researcher may be viewed as both a collector as well as an analyst as Jonathan Stock explains:

Instead of gathering recordings alone, the ethnomusicological researcher gathered experience, both in the form of contextual explanation (based on observation and on informants' own readings of what was going on) and in the form of personal know-how, gained from actually learning to perform the music s/he was studying. In other words, the researcher has the responsibility of living among the researched; living as far as possible as one of the researched; taking full part in their musical lives; and gradually coming to understand, typically through personal engagement in performance, what music really means in that particular society. (Stock 1999)

My decision to focus this thesis on the postural changes on the flamenco guitar was the next step in a journey I had already begun many years earlier. My relationships with those I would eventually come to study, my "shadow in the field," had already formed on many levels (Cooley 1997). "As individual fieldworkers," Cooley explains that "our shadows join with others, past and present, in a web of histories: personal histories, the histories of our academic field, and the histories of