Evolution and Structure in Flamenco Harmony

By Peter Manuel

The unprecedented vogue and revitalization of flamenco since the early 1960s have generated a considerable amount of scholarly literature on the subject, written primarily by Spaniards. These studies, while contributing greatly to our understanding of flamenco in its historical and social context, have tended to avoid less overtly humanistic subjects, including any analytical discussion of the structural aspects of flamenco as music per se. Hence, such a topic as the structure of flamenco harmony has received only passing mention in flamenco studies or oblique reference in guitar manuals.

While flamenco musicians themselves are generally uninterested in theorizing about their music, flamenco harmony is one of the most crucial expressive aspects of the genre and certainly merits some study in this regard. On a broader level, an inquiry into flamenco harmony may reveal some of the processes by which musical acculturation and instrumental idiosyncrasies can generate a syncretic and highly distinctive harmonic system.

This article addresses certain aspects of the development and present form of flamenco harmony. In brief, it advances two hypotheses: first, that flamenco harmony is a syncretic product of Arab modal practice and European harmony, and second, that many of the most distinctive features of the harmonic system, and in particular the use of altered chords, have arisen in direct connection with idiosyncratic characteristics of the guitar. The first of these theses, although difficult to document, is hardly original, and indeed, is widely taken for granted among flamenco scholars. Before proceeding directly to these arguments, some introduction to flamenco harmony and style may be appropriate here.

Flamenco emerged in the early nineteenth century in Andalusia. Although several non-Gypsies (payos) have excelled as flamenco performers, the genre has traditionally been cultivated primarily by Gypsies—specifically, the sedentary, relatively assimilated Gypsies of the towns of Seville and Cádiz provinces. In spite of the prominence of guitar and dance in its international image, traditional flamenco is primarily a vocal music, with guitar accompaniment. In the twentieth century, flamenco guitar style has adhered on the whole to traditional structural patterns and forms, while at the same time becoming considerably more sophisticated and complex, and, indeed, emerging as a solo concert art music.

The flamenco repertoire consists of some two dozen major cantes (and perhaps another dozen obscure ones), which are distinguished by such parameters as harmony, rhythm, text, and vocal melody. Several of the cantes are derived from Andalusian (non-Gypsy) folk music; especially prominent in
this category are the members of the *fandango* family (*malagueñas*, *granadinas*, *cantes mineros*, etc.). Other *cantes*, although Andalusian in a general sense, originated from Gypsy subculture and lack non-Gypsy counterparts; these would include *siguiriyas*, *soleares*, *bulerías*, and *tonás*. A few of the *cantes* derive from imported sources, especially the Latin American *guajira*, *colombianas*, *rumba*, and *milonga*, and the *alegrías*, which evidently originated from the Aragonese *jota*. These latter are of less interest to us here since they tend to lack the distinctive harmonic features of the Andalusian-derived *cantes*.

Andalusian harmony combines elements of European common practice with distinctive features reflecting Arab influence. Western-style tonic–subdominant–dominant chord relations do occur in various contexts in several of the *cantes*. Secondary dominants are even more common. Most of the *cantes*, however, are based on a distinct scheme for which no single term exists. Some analysts have used the term “Phrygian tonality” for this scheme, denoting a chordal-harmonic system based primarily upon the resources of the Phrygian scale, rather than the major and minor scales of common-practice Western harmony. In the context of flamenco E-Phrygian tonality, however, the “tonic” chord would be not E minor, as would be directly compatible with the scale, but rather E major. Hence, as might be expected, in melodies, G occasionally substitutes for G, affording the E–F–G–A formation so typical of Arab musics, and especially the *Hijaz* (and *Hijaz Kar*) mode or maqām. The chordal vocabulary used in the Phrygian context derives from the tonal resources of the E mode. The most basic and structural chord progression is Am–G–F–E, which is best described as iv–III–II–I rather than as a Western i–VII–VI–V, since in most cases the E is treated as a tonic and finalis.

In several of the *cantes*, features of both harmonic systems may be combined, whether in incidental or structural fashions. The juxtaposition of the two systems is perhaps clearest in the most common *fandango* pattern. Here the Phrygian-type tonality appears in the instrumental interludes (*falsetas*) preceding and following the sung *coplas*, which are themselves accompanied by standard I–IV–V harmonies. The pattern may be schematized as in figure 1, proceeding from left to right. This form is also used in *malagueñas*, *verdiales*, and, in different keys, in *granainas*, *rondeñas*, and *cantes mineros*, all of which are regarded as regional *fandango* variants. The popularity of the form may derive in part from its effective blending of common-practice and Phry-
gian harmonic progressions. The transition from the former to the latter at the end of each copla constitutes the dramatic climax of each section and is further intensified by an extended melisma (which in live performance may elicit roars of approval from the audience). Secondary dominants are used freely (e.g., inserting a D⁷ before the G in the falseta. Example 1, from a typical fandango de Huelva, illustrates most of these features.³

In several other cantes (tangos, tientos, siguiriyas, bulerías, soleares, etc.), Phrygian-type tonality (with secondary dominants) predominates throughout. Many of the chords in the Phrygian contexts are altered by the inclusion of nontriadic notes. Whether these alterations are regarded as structural or ornamental components of the harmonic system, they are certainly essential and integral elements of flamenco guitar style and should not be seen as dispensable decorations.

Most of the nontriadic tones can be analyzed as anticipations, suspensions, or ninths. It should be clarified, however, that even this rather basic level of analysis brings us beyond the realm of that employed by musicians themselves. Most flamenco musicians have little familiarity with Western music theory. In terms of such matters as chord nomenclature, flamenco theory is rudimentary, seldom extending beyond simple sol–fa designations, and as such it is certainly incommensurate with the complexity of the harmonies employed. Gypsy musicians, whose pedagogy is largely informal and intuitive (although quite efficient), are particularly unlikely to be able or willing to describe their music in analytical terms.

Flamenco Harmony and the Moorish Heritage

Arab and Berber ("Moorish") dynasties ruled most of southern Spain from 711 until the fall of Granada in 1492. While Europe was barely emerging from the Dark Ages, Moorish Spain hosted a brilliant and dynamic culture, synthesizing Arab, Christian, Berber, and Sephardic Jewish contributions. Within a few decades after 1492 most of the Muslim elite and many commoners emigrated to North Africa, leaving behind many thousands of Muslims (moriscos) who either converted to Christianity or sought refuge in isolated areas. Aside from the actual presence of the moriscos, the centuries of Moorish rule left a strong imprint on Andalusian folk music which continues to this day. Since the reconquista itself, this impact has both reinforced and been strengthened by Andalusian regional identity and hostility to Castilian rule.

Aspects of the Moorish influence on Andalusian and Spanish music in general have been summarized by Stevenson and, in a more tendentious manner, by Ribera.⁴ Arab musical texts circulated in Christian Spain, whose rulers patronized Moorish musicians, and Arab instruments such as the 'ud and bendir were adopted by Christians (as the lute and pandero, respectively).
Nevertheless, Spanish art music itself on the whole resisted Arab influence and continued along European stylistic lines. Andalusian folk music, on the other hand, appears to have incorporated a considerable amount of Moorish influence. Moorish music was widely enjoyed by all classes of Andalusians, and despite the absence of irrefutable documentation, it seems obvious that it was the Moorish heritage that makes Andalusian folk music so distinct from the more European styles of central and northern Spain. Although flamenco itself did not crystallize until the nineteenth century, certain features of flamenco—melismatic vocal style, additive meters, occasional neutral intervals, Hijaz-type modes, etc.—can clearly be seen as products of Moorish influence. Circular as this argument may be, there seems little reason to question it, especially given the inability to trace in great detail the evolution of Andalusian folk music.

We can infer that Phrygian-type harmonies were popular in Spain as early as the seventeenth century, for such chord progressions were common in contemporary Spanish and Spanish-American folk genres that were adopted in stylized form into art music. Foremost in this category were the chaconne and the villancico, wherein, for example, the familiar Am–G–F–E progression would occur in the more European context of an A-minor tonality. Such progressions are also common in the music of Spanish classical composers like Padre Antonio Soler (1729–83).
It is commonplace to perceive in Renaissance music a coexistence and synthesis of modal and tonal practices. In Spain, the modal practices consisted not only of those inherited from Byzantine and Hellenic systems but also the legacy of Arab music. The popularity of the E mode in Spanish folksong has been attributed primarily to Greco-Roman influence, but may well have been reinforced by Moorish music, and in particular by the popularity, past and present, of the maqâm Bayati, whose basic scale differs from the Phrygian scale only in using a neutral second degree (i.e., F half-sharp) rather than a fully lowered one. As mentioned above, the introduction of the major third in the E-Phrygian scale affords the lower tetrachord E–F–G♯–A. On the one hand, this can be seen as a means of reconciling the Phrygian scale with an E-major “tonic” chord and, in some contexts, as providing a temporary leading tone to an A-minor chord. On the other hand, the use of the augmented second in this context reflects the clear influence of the Arab mode Hijaz, whose scale is roughly E–F–G♯–A–B–C–D. Both Phrygian and Hijaz scales have upper rather than lower leading tones to the tonic, and, accordingly, harmony in flamenco and much of Andalusian folk music generally employs the chord progression F–E rather than B♭–E or E♭–Am as the fundamental cadence. Further, in both Hijaz and Bayati modes, the fourth degree (i.e., A, if E is given as the primary tonic) functions as a secondary modal tonic, and this practice may have contributed to the dominance of the Am–G–F–E chordal structure in which the A-minor chord, although generally not a finalis, nevertheless has a special stability and importance.

In flamenco, the syncretic coexistence of modal and tonal practices is especially clear. Some archaic cantes (e.g., Martinete, toná) are sung without guitar accompaniment, in a purely modal style; most Gypsy cantes were traditionally often sung a palo seco, that is, with only clapping for accompaniment. In cantes such as siguiriyas, the “primitive” harmonies of the guitar accompaniment (generally reiterating A major and its neighbor B♭) barely obscure the essentially modal character of the melodies. In all of the Andalusian (including Gypsy) cantes, the third scalar degree appears alternately in lowered (i.e., Phrygian) as well as raised (Hijaz) forms (e.g., G or G♯, respectively, if E is taken as the modal tonic). The Moorish heritage of flamenco is particularly evident in the frequently neutral intonation of the third, which also reflects the inherent instability of this note in the confluence of Phrygian modality and E-major tonality.

We have mentioned above that in Phrygian contexts, flamenco’s chordal vocabulary can be seen as deriving from the tonal material of the E mode. Thus, for example, in bulerías, tangos, tientos, and to some extent siguiriyas, which are generally played in a Phrygian/Hijaz mode, the most common chords are A, D-minor, C, B♯, G-minor, and F; E♯, the European dominant to A, appears only in special contexts and has a markedly distinct, if not discordant flavor.
The use of this Phrygian- and Hijaz-influenced chordal vocabulary is not unique to flamenco, but is shared by other musical cultures of the Mediterranean area that synthesize Turko-Arab and European features; thus, such harmonies are commonplace in the contemporary urban popular musics of Greece, southern Yugoslavia, and Turkey. Flamenco harmony, however, is distinguished from these by its penchant for the Am–G–F–E formula, and its unique vocabulary of altered chords, which, as we shall now argue, derive primarily from idiosyncratic potentialities of the guitar.

**Flamenco Harmony and the Guitar**

The international renown and the unprecedented stylistic and technical advances of flamenco guitar music in recent decades have to some extent obscured the fact that flamenco is primarily and originally vocal music, with or without guitar accompaniment. In this sense, in an analysis of flamenco as a whole, the harmonic structure is secondary in importance to the vocal melody. Nevertheless, the complexity and refinement of flamenco harmony in itself render this aspect of the genre worthy of study; moreover, a study of the structure of flamenco harmony may reveal certain important aspects of the historical evolution of flamenco as a whole.

As we have suggested above, some general aspects of flamenco harmony—such as the most basic chordal vocabulary—can be attributed to the confluence of European harmonic practices with Moorish and medieval modal traditions. As the basic harmonic vocabulary is somewhat limited (having as its core the Am–G–F–E and C–F–G\(^7\) configurations), much of the distinctive flavor of flamenco harmony rests in the extensive use of altered chords that include non triadic tones. Because flamenco guitar style has evolved primarily as accompaniment to singing, most of the non triadic tones can be seen to derive from the resources of the vocal melodies (generally the Phrygian/Hijaz configuration, here E–F–G\(/G\sharp–A–B–C–D\)).

Nevertheless, the precise manner in which these nontriadic tones are introduced cannot be traced to vocal origins; rather, the myriad coloristic voicings and variations in the chordal vocabulary are semi-independent developments. The particular form that these voicings assume suggests that their evolution and structure have been inextricably associated with the guitar, and that, in this sense, flamenco harmony cannot be considered independently of its relation to that instrument.

Most musical systems—and especially sophisticated urban musics like flamenco—have not evolved in such close connection with a particular instrument. Thus, for example, Western art music comprises distinct bodies of literature for particular instruments, but the underlying musical language—including the harmonic system—is an abstract entity not associated with any particular instrument. The structures of Indian, Arab, Chinese, and
Indonesian urban and art musics are similar in the sense that the underlying theoretical musical systems apply to all instrumental renditions; for instance, in North Indian music, aside from short compositions (gats) used to punctuate improvisations, properly speaking there is no “sitar music” per se, but only Hindustani music, which can be played on sitar.

Such is not the case with flamenco. By 1600 in Andalusia the guitar had become the standard instrument for accompanying dance and most kinds of popular song in general. Evidence suggests that a standard harmonic practice subsequently evolved which came to be adapted to flamenco as that music coalesced in the mid-nineteenth century. Guitar has always been the primary, and generally the sole nonpercussive instrument used for accompanying flamenco (occasional eccentric uses of flute and piano notwithstanding). The adaptation of Andalusian guitar-based harmonic systems to flamenco evidently occurred in the nineteenth century, for by the time of the earliest flamenco recordings (e.g., of Don Antonio Chacon, d. 1929), the harmonic system appears in a relatively full-grown form, which does not differ markedly from that of today. (Guitar style and technique, however, have developed dramatically in the twentieth century.)

The clearest evidence of the guitar’s importance in the evolution of flamenco harmony lies in the use of altered chords containing nontriadic tones. These chords tend to occur in the Phrygian-based cantes or sections of cantes rather than in the Latin American or more purely European cantes; thus, for example, they are more common in the Gypsy-derived bulerías than in the Cuban-derived guajira, and more common in the falsetas of fandango variants than in the copla, which employs standard I–IV–V harmonies. A study of flamenco guitar voicings reveals that in the most typical altered chords, the nontriadic tones are generally played on open (unfretted) strings (using the standard tuning E–A–D–G–B–E).

This phenomenon is perhaps clearest in the fandango family of cantes. Within this family, the fandango proper, the malagueñas, verdiales, and fandango de Huelva are all generally performed in the keys of E Phrygian and C major, as illustrated in example 1. Use of nontriadic tones in this group is perhaps less marked than in other fandango variants. Most typical here is the inclusion of a B and, in some cases, an E within an F chord in falsetas, as shown in example 2. (Here, and henceforth in this article, the notes rendered on open strings are shown with diamonds rather than ovals.) The B in such a chord may typically appear in the context of an Am–G–F–E “vamp” (rather than in the copla), and thus can be regarded as either a suspension, an anticipation, or as a pedal tone suggesting the modal tonic E. (Such altered F chords are also typical of the soleares, which is also based in E Phrygian.) It would be misleading to classify the chord out of context, in Western or jazz terms, as an F5.

Altered chords play a more important role in regional members of the
fandango family which are rendered in different keys. The granainas (granada­

inga), associated with Granada, closely resembles the fandango proper in its
typical melodic and formal structure. It is customarily played, however, in
the key of B Phrygian with coplas in G major. The "tonic" B-major chord is
often played (typically with florid arpeggios) with an added E and, in some
cases, a G. Both are nontriadic tones from the B-Phrygian mode, and both
are rendered on open strings, as shown in example 3. In the context of the
falseta, an E—again played on the open first string—is often added to the D
chord, as in the same example.

It is significant that the granainas is the only fandango variant, and indeed
the only cante, that can conclude on the iv chord of the iv–III–II–I com­
plex—here, the E-minor in the progression Em–D–C–B. In this sense it
bears a greater affinity with Western common-practice harmony, where E­
minor would be analyzed as the i chord in a i–VII–VI–V progression. Yet it
is probable that the custom of concluding on E minor can be attributed to
the resonance of a first-position E-minor chord on the guitar (with four open
strings), which makes it especially suitable as a finalis. This particular prac­
tice, then, may also be attributed to idiosyncracies of the guitar.

In the nineteenth century an important category of fandango variants devel­
oped in the mining regions around Linares, Murcia, and Cartagena; these
cantes, generically called cantes mineros, include the closely related taranto, taran­
tas, murcianas, and cartageneras. In flamenco style, they are generally played in

Example 3.
F# Phrygian, with coplas in D major. Here the “tonic” F#-major chord is, in Western terms, strikingly dissonant, since it incorporates three nontriadic tones from the Phrygian mode—G, B, and E—which, again, are played on the open strings of the guitar, as in example 4a. In typical variant voicings of the F# chord, the nontriadic tones similarly tend to coincide with the open strings, as in example 4b.

The custom of playing distinct regional fandango variants in different keys may have developed as the purely fortuitous product of evolution. For example, the custom of playing in B Phrygian may have been established in Granada well before the emergence of flamenco in the nineteenth century. Yet the extent to which flamenco had become a pan-Andalusian urban style in this period, coupled with the relatively recent origin of the cantes mineros, strongly suggests that the tradition of playing regional fandango variants in different keys arose as a somewhat deliberate means of introducing harmonic variety into cantes that would be otherwise quite similar—perhaps even so similar as to be redundant. While we know lamentably few details of the evolution of flamenco harmony before the era of recording, this development presumably occurred in the nineteenth century—conceivably through the influence of a limited number of guitarists. The now-standard practice of playing the somewhat obscure instrumental rondeñas (not to be confused with a vocal fandango variant of the same name) in C# Phrygian has clearly been the product of the conscious innovation of one early twentieth-century guitarist (Ramon Montoya), rather than of the ingenious, collective, anonymous creation to which much folk music is ascribed. Here, the guitar is retuned to D–A–D–F#–B–E, so that one can exploit the open strings in the C#-Phrygian scale (C#–D–E–F#–G#–A–B). It is likely that the practice of playing cantes mineros and granainas in F# and B, respectively, originated in a similar manner—that

Example 4a.

Example 4b.
Harmonically speaking, the other major group of *cantes* comprises those Gypsy-derived song types that are generally performed in the A-Phrygian tonality—notably, *tangos, tientos, bulerías*, and *siguiriyas*. Here, there is usually no modulation to a *fandango*-type I–IV–V pattern; rather, the *cantes* tend to oscillate in a more static fashion between A and B♭, with the occasional progression Dm–C–B♭–A (often with secondary dominants included, e.g., Dm–G7–C7–F–B♭–A); correspondingly, vocal melodies are distinctly modal in flavor. The most consistently altered chord in this set of cantes is the B♭, especially when it alternates with A major. Here, the nontriadic notes are usually E and often G; as usual, these are played on the corresponding open strings, as in the typical *tango* ostinato given in example 5.¹³

**Example 5.**

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**Conclusions**

These examples encompass most of the altered chords within the basic, traditional flamenco harmonic repertoire. A few common altered chords exist whose nontriadic notes are fretted rather than played on open strings. (Most prominent is the inclusion of a B♭ on the third string in an A chord, within the A-Phrygian context.) In recent decades, guitarists like Paco de Lucía have enriched the harmonic repertoire with a wide variety of innovative chords. Moreover, as mentioned above, there are some cantes of non-Andalusian origin (*alegrías, garrotín, guajiras*, etc.) where such altered chords are uncharacteristic. Nevertheless, the structure and rendering of altered chords within the cantes of Andalusian (and Gypsy) origin is remarkably consistent. In the vast majority of cases, the altered chords occur within the context of Phrygian tonality, rather than in the more European common-practice contexts; further, the nontriadic notes are invariably drawn from the
appropriate Phrygian scale. As such, the use of such chords can be seen as a product of the confluence of Moorish and, to some extent, medieval modal systems with European harmonic practice.

As we have seen, the nontriadic notes in the altered chords are almost exclusively rendered on open strings of the guitar, while the fretted notes provide the triadic intervals. This practice suggests that the chordal vocabulary itself has arisen in inextricable connection with the guitar, rather than developing as an abstract harmonic repertoire along the lines of Western common practice. Given the importance of this chordal vocabulary to the style, the tendency of traditional flamenco guitarists to play predominantly in first position should be seen not as an limitation, but rather as a means of exploiting the potentialities of using the open strings in harmonies, as well as in a variety of other techniques (pulling off, hammering on, and the like—as in the trill-like patterns in example 4).

Many aspects of the evolution of flamenco and Andalusian folk music in general will remain unknown to us, given the difficulties of documenting these genres before the era of recording. Yet we may be able to learn much about folk music history from detailed examination of the present-day form of such music. Many of the conclusions reached through such a process may remain hypothetical to some degree. To the extent that they are successful, however, they illustrate how musicological techniques designed for analysis of elite musics may be enlisted in the service of a more holistic musicology, encompassing the reconstruction of music history from below. Such an approach to cultural history would necessarily focus on the lower classes who have always constituted the majority, and whose toils have financed aristocratic culture, past and present.

NOTES

Research for this article, conducted in Seville in summer 1987, was funded partially by the Columbia University Council for Research in Humanities. I am also especially grateful to my guitar teacher, Dennis Koster, for his insights and inspiration.

Arab urban, classical, and to some extent, regional folk musics are based upon the usage of roughly a dozen māqāmāt (sing., maqām), or modes, of which Hijaz, Hijaz Kar, and Bayati are among the most important and common. The scales of these modes, to which reference is made in this article, are roughly as follows (taking E as the modal tonic or ground note):

- **Hijaz:** E F G♯ A B C♯ D E D C B A G♯ F E
- **Hijaz Kar:** E F G♯ A B C D♯ E D♯ C B A G♯ F E
- **Bayati:** E F♯ G A B C D E D C B A G F E

The association of particular keys with individual cantos and fandango variants refers to positions on the guitar rather than acoustical distinctions. Thus, a fretted Am chord on the guitar will be referred to by musicians (and in this article) as such (i.e., la menor), even if a capo is used, rendering it a different chord in aural terms.
Sung by Maria Vargas on Everest 3366/5, disc 5: B, 4.


The dubious nature of Ribera’s assertion of Arab influence in the thirteenth-century *Cantigas de Santa María* has been noted by several subsequent scholars. See, e.g., Antonio Martín Moreno, *Historia de la música andaluza* (Seville: Biblioteca de la Cultura Andaluza, 1985), 87–88.

See Ribera, 142–59.

Hispanic elements in some of Domenico Scarlatti’s sonatas (e.g., Longo nos. 241 and 243) has also been commented upon, e.g., by Moreno, 276.


See the subchapters on these countries in Peter Manuel, *Popular Musics of the Non-Western World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) for examples and further discussion of this phenomenon. It is of interest that such harmonies are rare in Indian popular music, which employs primarily diatonic modes and, accordingly, more European chordal accompaniments.

The Andalusian manner of counting the meter of the *fandango de Huelva* also appears to derive from its chordal strumming (*rasgueo*) pattern as performed on the guitar. In Western terms, the pattern is clearly in triple meter; but flamenco musicians invariably count it in five beats, as shown in figure 2.

**Figure 2.** The Andalusian manner of counting in the *fandango* meter.

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\begin{array}{cccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 \\
- & - & - & - & - \\
\end{array}
\]

This tonality is not entirely unique to the *cantes mineros*, as it often appears in *sevillanas* (folk songs of Seville). In both contexts, an A♯ (the third of an F♯ chord) may replace the dissonant, open G.

In some cases—especially in *siguiriyas*—a bass G is added, such that the chords come to resemble a Gm or Gm7—again, with the nontriadic E on the open first string. The flamenco *tango* should not be confused with its Argentine namesake, with which it does not appear to be related in any significant way.