

The BobCasts



Episode 8

The Impact of Andalucían Flamenco on Spanish Song and Dance

Welcome everyone. I'm Bob Greenberg, Music Historian-in-Residence for San Francisco Performances, and the title of this BobCast is the longwinded by not inaccurate *The Impact of Andalucían Flamenco on Spanish Song and Dance*.

Four of the five guitar recitals sponsored this season by San Francisco Performances will feature music by Spanish and Latin American composers, composers who, if not all from the southern Spanish region of Andalucía, were nevertheless profoundly—and we do not use that word lightly—profoundly influenced by Andalucían Flamenco. (Hey: does a composer have to be from New Orleans in order to be profoundly influenced by jazz? Exactly.)

These four Spanish guitar-influenced concerts will conclude on April 8, 2021 when the so-called "Royal Family of the Guitar"—the four Romeros—are joined by the American soprano Isabel Leonard in a program of guitar music and Spanish songs.

A Country Apart

In terms of its geographical isolation, with the Pyrenees (topping out at over 11 thousand feet high) to the north, the Atlantic Ocean to the West and the Mediterranean Sea to the south and east, Spain (and its Iberian sibling Portugal) stands physically apart from the remainder of Western Europe.

In terms of the abundance, variety, and preservation of its folk music, Spain again stands apart from the rest of Western Europe. To a degree unique, old traditions and festivals have been preserved in Spain, and with them, the music that evolved long ago to accompany those traditions and festivals.

Finally, in terms of its ethnic and cultural DNA, Spain can boast a degree of diversity well beyond that of any of its Western European neighbors. That's because Spain has been invaded, pillaged and occupied by more races and nationalities more often than the discount table at your local Wal-Mart. Greeks, Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Celts, Romans, North African Berbers, Visigoths, and Arabs—among *others*—have all trundled through at one time or another and left something of their cultures and genomes behind, there to intermix and congeal into cultures quite new. Jews, gypsies, equatorial Africans, Byzantines, French troubadours, Italian

and English traders, and Native Americans brought back from the colonies in the New World passed through as well, leaving something of their lives, genes, and cultural essence behind.

Nowhere is this cultural *smörgåsbord* more pronounced, and its results more musically dramatic, than in Andalucía, the southernmost and most populous region in Spain.

A Little History

In the year 19 B.C.E., the Romans completed their conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, a region they called Hispania. Hispania quickly became one of the wealthiest of all Roman territories: the breadbasket for much of the Empire and a rich source of minerals and metals as well. It was also a rich source of human capital: Hispanic soldiers were known for their toughness and enterprise, and three Roman soldiers of Hispanic origin went on to become three of Rome's greatest Emperors: Trajan, Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelius.

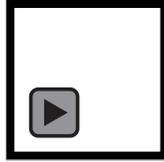
For better or worse, the Roman Empire went the way of dial up, and by the fifth century—the early 400s—Hispania had been invaded and occupied by a succession of central European—that is, Germanic—tribes: the Suebi, the Visigoths, and the Vandals among them. But no single foreign invasion was to have a more lasting impact on Spain than the one that occurred between 711 and 718, when Muslim armies conquered nearly all of the Iberian Peninsula. These Muslim conquerors were collectively referred to by Europeans as the “Moors”. They consisted of Berbers (north Africans), Black Africans, and Arabs. The Moorish invaders called their new European territory *Al-Andalus*.

Over time, Christian armies chipped away at *Al-Andalus*. In 1085, King Alfonso VI of Leon and Castile captured the great cultural city of Toledo, 42 miles south of Madrid. In 1249, the “*Reconquista*”—the “reconquering”—of what today is Portugal was complete. Eventually, all that was left of Moorish Spain was the “Emirate of Grenada” in the south.

1492 was a signal year for the Spanish King and Queen Ferdinand and Isabella. Not only did they finance that Genoese crackpot Christopher Columbus to sail west on the ocean blue, but they also oversaw the final *Reconquista* of Spain. On January 2 of 1492, after a grinding ten-year war, the Moorish Sultan Muhammad XII surrendered the fortress palace of Grenada—the famed Alhambra itself—directly to Ferdinand and Isabella. With that, nearly 800 years of Muslim rule in Spain came to an end. The last Moorish region of Spain—the Emirate of Grenada—retained its Moorish name, and is known as *Al-Andalus*—as Andalucía—to this day.

Muslim rule in Spain might have been over, but its cultural impact was not. And nowhere was that more true than in Andalucía, with its incredible melding of Christian and Muslim, European and African cultures. Many of the cultural elements that we, today, consider as being quintessentially Spanish—like flamenco, bullfighting, and Moorish-styled architecture—all originated in Andalucía.

Here's a big, fat, general statement for you: of all the very many folk music traditions that evolved and have been preserved in Spain, none has had a greater impact on Spanish culture and the international community than Andalucían Flamenco. Let's hear the opening of an anonymous song titled *Mother, I would like to have a star*, in the rhythm of a dance called a *Bulerías*, performed by Pepe Romero, guitar and Chano Lobato, singer.



Bulerías, Mother, I would like to have a star, Romero and Lobato

“Flamenco” is a genre of Spanish song and dance that originated in Andalucía. It’s an amazing hybrid/synthesis/melding of native Spanish, North African, Arab, and especially gypsy influences.

Flamenco consists of four elements: *cante* (meaning singing), *toque* (which is the especially percussive style of guitar playing typical of flamenco), dancing, and *palmas* (percussive handclapping).

In my humble (but not uninformed) opinion, flamenco is—along with jazz—the most viscerally exciting music to be found on this planet. I would go so far as to suggest that were Andalucía a media giant equal to the U.S. of A., we’d all be singing and dancing to flamenco and not that north American-born hybrid called rock ‘n’ roll.

(For our information: on November 16, 2010, UNESCO—the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization—declared flamenco to be one of the “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.”)

The word “flamenco” is Spanish for “flamingo”: a tall, slim, elegant bird with pinkish-white plumage. The flamingo is native to southern Spain and is also native to the migratory route followed by the Romani people from India to Spain. (More about the impact of the Romani on Andalucían music in a moment.)

While the exact connection between the “bird” and the artistic tradition is unknown, there can be no doubt that flamenco dancing—with its angular, stylized movements and red costuming—does indeed resemble the movements, coloring, and plumage of the flamingo.

We would isolate and discuss four stereotypical elements of Andalucían music in general and flamenco in particular: rhythm; mode (meaning the sorts of scales employed in the music); the guitar; and dance.

The single most characteristic aspect of flamenco is its rhythmic complexity. By definition, flamenco is a polyrhythmic music, an explicitly *African* approach to rhythm in which various contrasting rhythmic layers—some of them sung, some of them played on the guitar, some of them clapped, some of them danced—are layered, one atop the next. Rhythmically, flamenco has much more in common with African drumming than it does with Western European music.

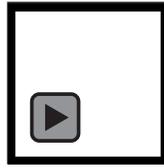
The “mode” or musical scale that stereotypically characterizes Andalucían music is called the *Phrygian* mode. Here it is:



E Phrygian Mode Up And Down

The identifying “sound” of the Phrygian Mode is a half-step between the first and second

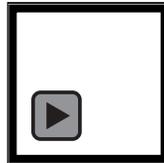
degree of the scale and a whole-step between the seventh and first degree, creating this most characteristic sound:



Noodle Phrygian 7-1-2

There you have it: an instant Spanish-music melodic stereotype, which is, in truth, an instant Andalucían musical stereotype.

There are a number of variants of this “Phrygian Spanish” sound. For example, we often hear the third degree of the Phrygian mode raised to create this:



Phrygian Raised Third

The identifying element of this scalar variant is the interval of an augmented second that occurs between the second and third degrees of the scale:

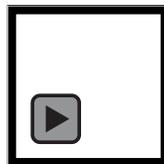


Phrygian Augmented Second

If this “augmented second” sounds vaguely Mid-eastern, vaguely Arabic to you, you’re ears are on the money. According to the Spanish music scholar Martin Cunningham:

“[the] augmented second has been attributed unquestioningly to Arab influence.”

Finally, there’s another version of the scale, alternately called the “Spanish Gypsy scale” or the “Flamenco scale”. It sounds like this:

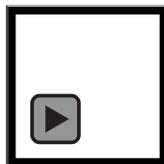


Spanish Gypsy (Flamenco) Scale

This “scale” has its roots in the music of the Spanish Romanis—the gypsies—who settled in Andalucía in the fifteenth century. These Spanish gypsies—known as “Gitanos”—emigrated from the Punjab and Rajasthan regions of northern India around the year 1000, and arrived in *Al Andalus* via northern Africa.

The music and culture of the *Gitanos*—part Indian, part Arab, part whatever—melded with the pre-existing cultural stew of Andalucía to create a cultural hybrid that eventually crystallized in flamenco.

Let's hear some music that brings together all of these various, characteristically "Spanish" types of scales, a piece from the pen of Agustín Lara titled *Granada*, performed by soprano Isabel Leonard and guitarist Sharon Isbin.



Lara, Granada, Leonard and Isbin

Scholars of Spanish folk music often refer to the various scales we just discussed as the "E" scales, because, far more often than not, Spanish folk music begins and ends on the pitch "E".

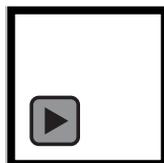
Strange, you say? Nope: not when we consider that the highest and lowest strings on the six-string Spanish guitar—the principal folk instrument of Spain—are both tuned to "E". In fact, the strings of the Spanish guitar—also-known-as the Classical guitar and the concert guitar—are all tuned to pitches contained within an E Phrygian scale: E-A-D-G-B-and E. It is because of the natural characteristics of the guitar that so much Spanish folk music is set in scales based on the pitch "E"!

While the history of the guitar is as complex as the history of Andalucía, we are going to cut to the chase. So, while the various ancestors of the guitar can be traced to ancient Greece, Persia, North Africa, and Western Europe, the guitar as we know it today—a gorgeous, figure eight-shaped beauty bearing six strings—is a Spanish instrument, created in no small part to perform flamenco.

If rhythm lies at the heart of flamenco, then correspondingly, so does Andalusian dance. Such flamenco titles as *Malagueña*, *Fandango*, *Bulerías*, *Sevillana*, *Allegría*, *Granadina*, *Farruca*, and *Zapateado* all refer to specific dances and dance rhythms.

For example, a "*zapateado*" is a dance of Mexican Indian origin that was brought back to Spain, there to be claimed by the Spanish as their own. A Spanish *zapateado* is a brisk, percussive dance in which the dancers strike the heels of their shoes on the floor: a flamenco tap-dance, as it were. We might have figured that out from the dance's name—"zapateado"—which is derived from the word "*zapato*", the Spanish word for shoe.

As an example, here is Pepe Romero, guitar and dancer Maria Magdalena performing an anonymously composed *zapateado*:



Zapateado, Romero and Magdalena

Damn, that's fine.

We conclude with a quote by Pepe Romero, who will grace our stage on April 8, 2021:

“To me, flamenco is the soul of Andalucía transformed into music. When I think of flamenco, images from my youth flash through my mind: my roots, the country of my birth, the sun which warmed and gave joy to [my home city of] Málaga. Flamenco is the Andalucía of the poets, painters, and musicians, the Andalucía of the dreamers, all of whom struggle to better the lives of those who suffer.”

Thank you.