

What is Flamenco?

Joost J. Joosten ©

December 1, 2005

What is flamenco? I could not help repeating this question to myself time and again after seeing *Vicente Amigo*'s concert at the Municipal House this Sunday, November 27. Beyond any doubt, the performance was very professional and technically speaking of a very high standard. Yet I missed something, some real flamenco, as the concert was announced as bringing real flamenco. But then again, *what is real flamenco?*

This question is far from being trivial and at many a university you can study flamencology trying to answer it. The musical style of flamenco is still very much developing, looking for new boundaries and trying to define itself.

Traditionally, one points at the 15th century as the starting point of the long tradition of flamenco music. In the year 1492, Isabela la Católica in her supreme wisdom decided to expel all Jews, Arabs and Gypsies from the Iberian peninsula. (Recently, there has been quite some controversy when the Vatican wanted to beatify her.)

Many of the persecuted minorities indeed took to their heels. Others took refuge in the mountains. In these mountain villages, a melting pot of music and culture from the Gypsies, the Moors and the Sephardic Jews, it is believed that flamenco music emerged. In the centuries that followed flamenco developed into a mature form of art which is best characterized by its rough and lamenting singing, and a guitar accompaniment.

In the second half of the 20th century the development of flamenco music really took revolutionary proportions. Firstly, the guitarists developed better techniques and a larger repertoire of musical embellishments. As a logical consequence, they demanded a more prominent place in flamenco music.

Secondly, there is the phenomenon of *Paco de Lucía*. This legendary flamenco guitarist gave –almost on his own– a new direction to the development of Flamenco, looking for collaborations and fusions with all sorts

of other musical styles. He introduced new instruments and started to play with new ensembles.

These two major changes were very much present in Vicente Amigo's show. It is clear that the guitar is the central thing in the performance, Mister Amigo sitting in the middle of his septet. The singer (*Blas Córdoba*) was excellent, but his contributions to the spectacle were reduced to singing a couple of lines and the distance between the guitarist and the singer is as large as possible thereby excluding the possible intimate interaction between them which is commonly considered to be essential. Fair enough, it was mainly a guitar concert, but one might wonder whether flamenco without the *cante jondo* (profound/deep song) and the intimate interaction between singer and guitar is still at the heart of flamenco. I have my doubts.

Spectacle really is the best word to use here, as the septet truly delivers a musical spectacle. And the audience? By and large, they loved it. Of course: easy, accessible tunes, typical exotic Spanish temperament with professionally planned climaxes. Admittedly, there were some very good parts, but really, at times I could not escape from the impression that I was walking in a shopping mall listening to some easy consumption-stimulating tunes. At other moments the guitar would bring forth mystical sounds which would result almost in new-age like ambience.

I hope that the Prague audience will get the opportunity to get acquainted with other aspects of flamenco. Although it is not easy to pin down what flamenco is, one can safely state that it is not just the music presented by Vicente Amigo and his band.