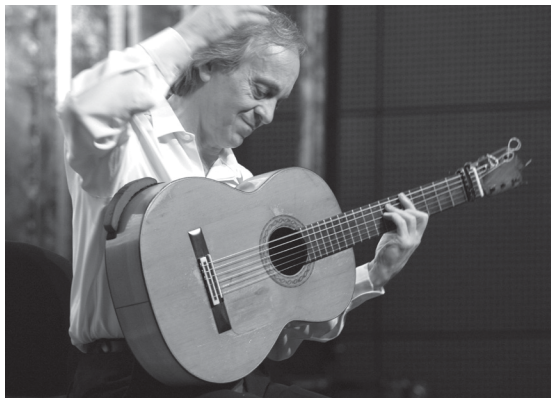


A CONVERSATION WITH PACO PEÑA

BY JOHN HENKEN



With the passing of Paco de Lucía in 2014, Paco Peña is almost incontestably the reigning master of flamenco guitar – “flamenco puro,” flamenco without qualifiers. 50 years after his solo recital debut in London, which followed a substantial apprenticeship accompanying singers and dancers in Spanish flamenco troupes, Peña is also the conscience of the art.

I have had the joy of experiencing Peña’s performances for over half his career, first as a fan, and later as a critic for *The Los Angeles Times*. I caught up with him last month by phone, as he stopped in London for a few days before traveling to his other home in Córdoba to prepare for this concert, and another program with his full flamenco company.

JH Tell us about this concert. The title, “Esencias,” suggests several possibilities – “Essences,” perhaps, being music as the essential heart of flamenco.

PP The idea was to do a guitar concert, and so I thought about what is fundamental about that – what I could say with my guitar. What is most essential to me is expressing honest, open emotion – in this case, with the guitar – but in the context of deep respect

for and involvement with the flamenco culture as a whole.

And I have two additional guitarists joining me. With that, I can bring in other aspects of flamenco which are also essential. José Fernández has been with me for many years – we have done a lot of interesting things together. He is a brilliant musician – very sort of ... restless, and always looking for possibilities. Rafael Montilla has also been in my company for many years, and is very solid support. We’ll be doing some ensemble playing, which is not very common in flamenco. It allows for the combination of contrasting styles, adding variety to what I can do. I’m very rooted in tradition, yet also interested in being current.

JH Reviewing a concert of yours in 1993, I wrote, “Guitarist Paco Peña is usually labeled a traditionalist ... but he is also an imaginative innovator and individualist.” Is that a difficult balance – the pressure to preserve stylistic purity versus the artistic imperative to create something fresh?

PP That’s an interesting reflection. It is neither difficult nor easy; it is inevitable. I want to do interesting things that surprise me. I have heard a lot of music; I love a lot of music. One absorbs other feelings, other sounds, they enter your music. I belong to a tradition that I greatly respect, but I do not want to stay still.

JH Is authenticity a matter of technique and form, of “toque” and “palos”, so to speak? Or is it a question of spirit and attitude?

PP It’s all of those things. To be authentic is to be open and vital. Technique is necessary, in order to be able to project a message that is true. To be authentic is to be honest.

JH You are well known for your work with dancers and singers in flamenco companies - your own and others. How do your solo recitals relate to the ensemble experience?

PP My first love was being part of an ensemble. I am not a person who likes being the center of attention. In Spain many years ago, young guitarists played all the time, whether with other aficionados, or just exploring individually and creating pieces. But solo flamenco guitar concerts were simply not done. Our hero was Niño Ricardo, a great player we would hear on the radio and, in rare occasions at the theatre, always accompanying singers and dancers. Later I discovered the great maestro Sabicas, and his playing helped me enormously to push ahead. I then decided to play solo, but in order to project flamenco, not myself. After I found success, I decided to create a company with the same philosophy. All of my work is based on great respect and gratitude for my culture.

JH You recorded an album titled “Flamenco Puro.” What do those words mean to you?

PP It is the story of my life. That was not my title, by the way; though I did have a show called Flamenco Puro. It means flamenco as it is - pure - but from my own perspective. When I was young and ambitious, I heard the album “Flamenco Puro” by Sabicas. It was a wonderful recording that changed everybody in Spain and pointed the way. Nobody knew much about him then; it was recorded in America, where he lived. It was a fantastic album, and remains a favorite of mine. I might have been trying to emulate that wonderful recording.

JH You have also recorded and performed with a wide range of collaborators, including a number of South American musicians, such as the late Eduardo Falú and the Chilean group Inti-Illimani. Is this a matter of fusion, or finding shared musical perspectives?

PP Fusion is not something I try to do. I try to learn from other cultures. And those musicians also like to learn from what I have to offer. I can't really say that fusion is part of what I do. Paco de Lucía - I'm sure you know all that he did in so many styles - not even he left for one millimeter the connection with real flamenco.

JH You have said that “Flamenco is a way of articulating intense emotions.” Is that where you find common ground with diverse musical styles and traditions?

PP Definitely. I'm interested in anything that connects with people in such a way that they get really involved. There is, of course, intensity in other artistic forms; it doesn't happen only in flamenco.

JH Today we find flamenco in many forms - there is even a very lively flamenco jazz piano subset. What do you see as the future of flamenco?

PP There really is a lot going on, as has been the case over the last 40 years. The future of flamenco is very healthy, because young people have taken it up very seriously. When flamenco guitar first became popular, curiosity and its colorful character may have been the motive. Now that initial ambush - that first surprise - has paused a little. Young people now are trying to find and project true emotion.

And I think the interplay between flamenco and jazz is wonderful. The inspiration, the harmonies are very interesting. There is a danger in becoming too sophisticated, too brainy, however. So, I add a note of caution, lest everything become the same; these are particular art forms.

JH You have said that “tradition will decide what is good about innovation.”

PP I think that what is not true, not productive, about innovations will be rejected by tradition. What is good will be accepted; will become part of the tradition. Flamenco is growing all the time.