

Back in the old days, when I was just beginning my studies of flamenco, things were different. Flamenco was relatively unknown, and you really had to hunt for it in obscure places. My upstate New York town was New Hartford, on the border of the small city of Utica. There was one record shop there which helped me locate and order flamenco records. I was lucky if I could find two or three new records a year. The nearest flamenco guitarists were in New York City, some 250 miles by train or bus. I went there, 6 hours each way, for a one hour lesson with Mario Escudero whenever I could afford it, which wasn't often. While in the City, I hunted for flamenco records in Spanish language record shops, and occasionally found a good one. I found a lot of not-so-good ones, too. When I was at home, I studied those few records until I wore them out.

Today, as I said, things are different. Flamenco is much more well-known, and even popular. It has a world-wide audience. Cds and videos are available on the net, from mail order, and even at the local bookstore. Yes, flamenco is now easy to get. But this ease of access can lead to a grave problem associated with our time and culture. Today is the age of instant gratification, and the age of deception. It is hitting flamenco. And it is hurting flamenco!

I'm referring to the Flamenco Kit. What many students want today is instant flamenco. Put on the shoes and hat, pick up the guitar, learn a Gipsy Kings rumba, and ¡voilà! ... There you are, a flamenco performer!

"Study flamenco? What are you talking about? Everybody knows that flamenco is improvisation. That means just do what you want, right? Besides, I'm doing my own thing, you know, so what's wrong with that? Anyway, I'm only teaching beginners. And besides, the audience doesn't know the difference between my stuff, and that other flamenco stuff that Canales and Yerbabuena are doing."

"My experience? You mean my bio? Well, I know I say I'm a Gypsy from Spain, but I just tell people that on the internet chat lines. It's a game, really. I know I studied for 6 years with Lucia, but, you know, it sounds better if I say I studied with Granjero in Santa Fe, or with Sabicas (He's dead, so now nobody can refute me!) and with the Gypsies in Granada. (You remember, that 2 hour workshop I took while on vacation.) I know I said I performed at Lincoln Center and at the Sevilla Biennial. What I meant to say was I took out my guitar and strummed it in front of the gate at the Biennial. But hey, I played there, you know, so it isn't really lying."

If this were a joke, it would be funny stuff. The problem is that I have heard every one of these excuses from the Flamenco Kit crowd, and quite frankly, it riles me. It is not only an insult to me, and my fellow artists, it is an insult to the art of flamenco itself.

Before you start thinking that I've lost it, here are some quotes from Teo Morca's book, in an essay called "Becoming Professional, Being Professional."

"Many beginners feel that after a short time of study they can put on the costume, dance their routines and clichés and think the public does not know the difference. This sounds very basic, but too many people fall short of representing flamenco because they have picked their talents 'too green.'" (Morca 1990; 103)

"Basically, there is no shortcut to arriving at a level of flamenco professionalism. You have to give a great deal to the art before you expect to receive. If someone studies in college, say in medicine, they must go through the basics over and over for years. Who would go to a doctor who has only studied six months or a year? Why should people who have studied a few months feel that they can represent flamenco as a profession? When is the respect for the art and for themselves as a true representative of this art going to be realized?" (Morca 1990; 104)

Here a quote from another famous artist. "A man has to know his limitations." (Clint Eastwood as 'Dirty Harry')

I was once visited by a guitar aficionado who introduced himself saying he had played flamenco for over 20 years. Imagine my shock when he couldn't even hold the guitar right, let alone play anything. The bottom line is that the length of time from your first exposure to flamenco until now has nothing to do with how good you are. What matters is what you have done with that time. 20 years of playing the guitar for 20 minutes every week or two does not compare to the student who eats, sleeps, and drinks with the instrument for 5 years, and doesn't put it down until he falls asleep with it. Here's what Tomatito says in an interview about his own study:

"Question: You must have practised a lot then?

Tomatito: Yes, for hours and hours, every day. I had the kind of 'guitar fever' you only catch when you're young.

Question: Every day?

Tomatito: Yes, every single day. I started in the morning. My mother always had to call me for meals. I locked myself in my room with my guitar and only came out when I was really tired from playing."

(Ege and Jundt, 1995)

"Ok," you say. "Enough. I get the point. But I just study flamenco for fun, and don't have the time to study palmas, braceo, taconeo, for hours and hours at a time. I can barely make it to the the classes I'm taking now. I just want to learn enough so that I can perform in front of the public."

Sorry. As the Zen masters would say, after soundly slapping your face, "You have missed the point completely." A student with that kind of commitment has no business performing professionally, i.e., in front of the public. If you are competent enough to be asked to perform with professional people occasionally, then that is indeed an opportunity that cannot be measured in value. But it would be abusing the art and the public to go off and start doing your own thing when you can't hold it on your own.

Now for a look at the bright side. Many students indeed live busy lives, and can devote little or no time to a professional level of flamenco study. And that is perfectly ok. Some students will never become competent dancers or guitarists. The fact is, the arts require some basic neuromuscular coordination, and some people just don't have it, even though they love it. And that is fine, too. Clint Eastwood's admonition, "A man has to know his limitations" is really a guiding light principle here. You can still be a student, an aficionado, a true lover of the art. You can still take all the classes you want and satisfy your soul for art and beauty. But keep your goals at the student level. Juergas and student recitals are the right place for you. The public doesn't expect the same from a student performance that it expects from a 'professional' group. In a student recital, you can still be challenged, and experience the joy and fear of performing. But you'll be honest, too.

The final word. If you call yourself a professional, then the other professionals out there are going to look at you with a different eye. The Flamenco Kit is worthless in their world. What will they see?

End Notes

Ege, Marcel and Bruno Jundt La Guitarra Flamenca de Tomatito

Encuentro Productions, Dorfstrasse, Switzerland 1995

Morca, Teo Becoming the Dance: Flamenco Spirit Kendall/Hunt Dubuque, Iowa 1990