

Interview with Paco Peña

Flamenco guitar virtuoso Paco Peña is known all over the world for the depth and intelligence of his music and for the breadth of his work as a collaborator, composer, and producer.

His primary vehicle has always been the flamenco cuadro, a small ensemble including guitar, singers and dancers and his primary focus has always been on flamenco puro, pure flamenco. In fact, he called his first touring company, formed in 1970, Flamenco Puro. However, he has never treated flamenco as something to be kept sacrosanct and separate from other forms of music and has shared the bill with everyone from Jimi Hendrix to Joe Pass to Leo Kottke. He is also well known for his collaborative work with classical guitarist John Williams and Chilean ensemble Inti-Illimani among many others. Peña has also taken flamenco out of its small ensemble context, creating large scale theatrical and sacred works, most notably his *Missa Flamenco*, a flamenco mass.

Whether en cuadro or in collaboration, Peña takes great pleasure in working with others. In conversation, he often uses the word "link," when talking about connecting with the audience, with other performers, or with other musical cultures. It's a good description of his approach to music-making. He tries to make a solid connection with others which allows each to remain distinct and intact.

I recently met with Sr. Peña at his hotel during the California leg of an international tour with Inti-Illimani. He was gracious and eloquent, despite having been awakened in the middle of the night by a 7.1 earthquake.

There's very little about your early years in the biographical materials I've read about you, Most only say that you were playing professionally by the age of twelve and that you arrived in London in the '60's.. Could you fill us in a bit more?

Well, when you say I started at twelve, actually, it's more nebulous than that. I began very early. Growing up in Andalucía at that time, people made their own entertainment. I had one brother and seven sisters. My mother had a vegetable stall in the market. We lived in a Casa de Vecinos, a house shared by about ten families. We had one very small room upstairs, and one room downstairs. The families lived in various bits of the house and we all shared one toilet and one kitchen.

In that situation, people made their own entertainment, and the kind of entertainment they made was a kind of flamenco or whatever was going on in the popular music of the time. The inclination of any young child was to join in.

My brother was a guitarist; he started playing before me. There was a guitar in the house and I remember distinctly being very small and picking it up and tinkling about with it. So yes, by the time I was twelve, I was definitely playing. I immediately loved the thing and I was very keen. I was playing all the time just for fun.

I had no teacher. My brother showed me a few things. He was an amateur who liked to enjoy himself with his friends and sang played the guitar a bit. My sister also sang. In that kind of community atmosphere, linking up and joining in was very easy, inevitable.

Where I went to school there was a folk group, a rondalla [an instrumental and vocal ensemble performing folk music], which I joined around age nine. There was a teacher and that was the only kind of teaching I received.

Inevitably, when you are a bit talented, when you're really keen, there are groups of people who want you to play with them and this is how, when I was young, I was doing little bits of concerts in small-time situations. That's how it came to be said that at twelve I was playing professionally. Of course I was, but it wasn't terribly important.

You were being invited to juergas?

No not really. It was more like concerts. I wasn't strictly playing in the flamenco world. I was doing anything with the guitar that I enjoyed and that I saw other people do. Of course, flamenco was part of that and I was keen to do that, but I was developing musically.

At that age you can pick up so many things . . .

Exactly. So that really is the background.

So during that period you were working with singers, some of who would want to sing, for example, an alegrías, or other form . . .

Yes.

And they would tell you what they wanted . . .

No. Again, the thing was to just join in and make mistakes. That's the way you learn flamenco. I don't want to sound sad or dramatic, but I didn't have any money for lessons. I had a friend, about my age, who played guitar in the market square. He had a teacher. He was learning bits from his teacher and I was learning bits from him.

You try to absorb what you can. Of course, at that time, it was por flamenco. My brother only played flamenco, but he wasn't very good. This friend was learning from a flamenco teacher and that was very important. I would link up with this guy and he would show me what the teacher had said about the alegrías, or whatever. As for singing, we were aficionados . . . I was doing guitar, others were doing singing, others were doing dancing, in the same, small-time kind of way, learning this or that, struggling to learn, but also enjoying it at the same time.

So how do you go from being a kid playing guitar, who's pretty good at it, compared to the other kids around, to being a professional guitarist?

Ah well, there was a fantastic passion there, in my case anyway. I discovered flamenco very early on. It grips you in a way that you can't get away. In my case, all I can say is that one thing leads to another. I was fascinated with the guitar, playing all the time at home. Any time there was any flamenco activity, I went if my mother would let me. I was very young and she wouldn't let me just go to anything. I met all kinds of people.

People who, when there is someone with a little talent, wanted to grab him and take him here and there.

I was doing Coros y danzas de educación y descanso, a government-sponsored activity keeping alive the folk traditions of different parts of Spain. We used to keep dances alive, not only flamenco, but folk dances. We used to travel to various music congresses around Spain. I was a little kid among bigger people and I was fascinated. We went to Madrid, Saragossa, Salamanca, and Barcelona. It was a wonderful experience for me. That was a world I wanted to be part of. Coming back, I was always longing to go back out again. And so, one thing leads to another. In those ways, you link up with people who eventually go with a serious company, which I did as well. It was pathetic, but nonetheless, it was a commercial venture. I was engaged to go do a flamenco show with a company that toured Andalucía. Well, those experiences eventually make you a professional musician, eventually make you decide one day that that's what you want to do.

I was also doing all kinds of little jobs and going to school. I had to leave school at fourteen to find a job to bring a little money into the family. I worked as an office boy for a notary and, later, for a large hardware shop. At night, I was also playing guitar when I could. Those little tours eventually made me decide that that was what I wanted to do, so I left my job and went to Madrid and, later, to the Costa Brava. Eventually, I ended up coming to London with a flamenco company.

Were you a soloist?

At the time, I'd never had any ambition of playing solo at all. I was just part of the company, but they told me to play a solo in the show. When I did, there was an overwhelming response which I wasn't aware could exist. That there was this audience for the solo guitar was really a revelation. That didn't exist in Spain. For me, it was fascinating.

When the show finished, I went back to the Costa Brava, still playing in clubs, kind of wasting my life away. I was more ambitious than that. I felt I wanted to do something more important. I remembered that solo. I'd had an opportunity in London which I'd never seen in Spain. The guitar was nowhere as a solo instrument in Spain. So, when I was about 24, I decided to go back to London and become a soloist.

I had a job waiting for me when I arrived. I was the main attraction at Restaurante Antonio in Covent Garden in London. Of course, my intention was to push on. Eventually, a manager saw me and one thing led to another.

Do you remember what the solo piece was you played that first time in London?

Good question. I don't know, I think it was probably some kind of zambra or something popular like that. It could have been rondeñas. I was interested in the deeper side of things, not the virtuosic, flamboyant side of flamenco, but rather it's deeper, emotional aspect. Things that matter. You know how flamenco has this deep commitment to emotions. I've always been that way. That's the way I've always felt in my flamenco. So I can imagine that I would have tried to bring that across rather than playing something light-hearted.

So where did this ambition that led you from the Costa Brava to London come from?

It all links up with my very early fascination with being an artist. When I was growing up with the guitar, I saw how beautiful it might be to play professionally. Instead of flamenco on the radio you began to hear fascinating sounds from other countries - Elvis Presley, Paul Anka. These stars were successful. Flamenco singers at that time also fascinated me. I wanted to emulate people that were successful in that way.

Because they had nice lives?

Exactly. And also to be able to carry audiences with this beautiful thing. All that was linked to my eventual leap forward [to London]. I was fascinated with the idea of being a professional, of being able to convince [an audience] with what I was doing. At that point, it was very important to me to try to do something with my life. You've got to imagine, I was a young person having a very easy life. The Costa Brava was a haven for performers. It was easy to make quite good money. You only had to play at 11 o'clock at night, maybe for an hour and a half and that was your day. You got up early, you went to the beach, you picked up girls, you had good food, you did nothing with yourself unless you really wanted to do something. It was not enough.

It sounds nice.

Oh it was. It was fantastic, but if you want to start something in yourself, you think of moving on, so thinking of playing solo, of being successful, was not the real ambition. I needed fullness in my life. And I saw an inkling of what that might be.

And it wasn't playing guitar on the Costa Brava . . .

No exactly. Staying there would have meant a continuation of the same kind of life. So you moved to London to stay?

Yes, tentatively at first. I didn't know whether it would work or not. Things happened quite quickly. It was the Sixties, a fascinating time. There was great deal of optimism and of people that craved for things that might be exotic. The guitar was very popular at that time. I remember my first big gig was with Jimi Hendrix. I played at the Royal Festival Hall in London at a "Guitar In." That concert included classical guitar, flamenco guitar, blues guitar, and Jimi Hendrix at the top of the bill. That sort of activity was fascinating for me - the fact that flamenco could capture a forum like that in the best hall in London. That spurs one to go forward. To be offered that was a very good kind of beginning. People began to notice me and I played a debut concert in Wigmore Hall. That established me much more in London, and projecting from London to other places. And things began to develop that way fairly quickly.

When you decide to go deeper, did you make yourself work harder on technique?

Indeed, very much so.

Totally self-guided?

Well, yes, with other friends, but I never had any teacher at all. But of course, I was keen to learn from anybody, and when I was on the Costa Brava there were other musicians around I used to link up with, I used to investigate in one way or another. I knew a classical guitarist who opened my eyes quite a lot in terms of position and possibilities for moving the fingers of the left hand. We were sharing a room in Madrid. I don't even remember his name. There are many ways to move the fingers and I discovered that you may be a better engine if you move in one particular way than if you were to simply put the fingers where they went. Be fascinated with technique and try to discover in yourself how to maximize your potential.

Of course, on the coast there were other flamenco guitarists who were also very keen. We were learning falsetas from everybody and doing all kinds of things. That was a very creative, important time. I simply decided to play better. I changed my technique dramatically. At that time, I played in a very easy sort of way, but not really strong enough. It was slow - sliding the fingers across the strings. I could do everything, but not very well. So I decided I was going to change my technique completely at that time.

Would you say that your flamenco is particularly Cordobese?

Córdoba is not the center of flamenco, but Córdoba has something special culturally. It's been a center of culture for thousands of years, but I do not boast that Córdoba is the flamenco center of the world. Sevilla is more, and Cadiz, that area, but Córdoba has a strong tradition.

How would you characterize that tradition?

Perhaps a little more serious than others. A little more reflective. Singers are the movers of the flamenco world, traditionally, and the singers there tend to be more philosophical, more transcendental, looking inwards.

Also, the falsetas I learned early on were quite musical. There was a woman in Córdoba, I never met her. Her name was Pepita. I don't even know her surname, but Pepita was the source of most of the flamenco music in Córdoba. All the young people that wanted to play, mostly learned from Pepita. Her falsetas were quite musical. So maybe the flamenco there isn't the most flamboyant, but certainly it has something to say and to this day there is something characteristic about music from Córdoba. Nowadays there are many young good guitarists from Córdoba. The guitar has done well there.

Speaking of traditions, you recorded the music of Ramón Montoya and Niño Ricardo. What led to that recording? Was it part of your early development, or did you decide to take a scholarly approach to flamenco traditions?

I didn't intend to teach anybody anything with that recording. I simply wanted to display my deep respect and love for what those two genius guitarists had done. I had been recording for many years prior to that and I moved to different company, Nimbus.

I wondered, actually, whether you had a hand in starting that company?

Well I started the flamenco scene there. They had already been established. There had a very unique approach to what they did. They only recorded ambisonically, only one microphone for everything. No mixing, just live recordings. They wanted something particular and pure, live and unaltered by technology.

It occurred to me that I might do a tribute to those two great guitarists on my first recording for Nimbus. It wasn't a crusade or anything. It was simply a challenge for me to put myself in the shoes of two great guitarists, to play strictly their music, not adding my own voice. I had learned a lot from them, of course.

Directly?

No. Niño Ricardo was my inspiration and, for all the people of my generation, his was the most significant contribution to the scene. I'd seen him personally. I'd never learned anything from him directly, but I had emulated him. Ramón Montoya died before I was born. Listening to his music, I discovered how great he had been. The three people for me are Ricardo, Montoya, and Sabicas. I didn't learn directly from them, but everything I played was in a way touched by their music. But it was always trying to be my music. So to change that around and try to become them, to try to understand what made them move in the directions they moved in their pieces was very interesting and challenging. I studied their music, listening to their recordings. I discovered a lot about their personalities through their music, what motivated them, and I fell in love, even more strongly, with their contribution.

I knew then that Montoya had been an inexhaustible torrent of ideas and creativity, beautifully crafted musical ideas in the flamenco mold. Flamenco for Montoya had been the vehicle for a wonderful musician who would have been equally wonderful in any vehicle.

In that light, I discovered that Niño Ricardo had taken that creativity from Montoya, but he adds something more, he adds blood and earth to his art that stirs you so much. The soul of flamenco poured out of everything he did in his music. Sabicas had a different quality as well in his delivery, also the inexhaustible capacity to dream up ideas, and execute them so beautifully.

I can't picture you being able to do that as a accompanist behind a singer or a dancer without their turning around and stopping you.

My first love, really, is to link up with others, to be part of the ensemble, but, as I said earlier, when you become a little bit ambitious about yourself, obviously you stop and think and try to move forward.

I don't think there's another flamenco guitarist more eager to work with other people.

Well, of course, I love that.

What do you get out of playing with Inti-Illimani, for example?

Well, emotionally, it's a very rewarding experience, because they're a great bunch of people. Some of the personnel has changed since I first knew them, of course. The initial group was a wonderful group of friends and really creative musicians. There was a feeling of warmth in coming together with them.

They seem like they would be a nice bunch of guys to hang out with anyway.

Absolutely. That's why it all happened. I get a lot of satisfaction working with them because my approach to music isn't a million miles from what they do. Because of cultural links and so on, it's fairly accessible to me, but nevertheless, it's very fascinating, a different culture than mine. So to link up with them teaches me, it makes my appreciation of music that much broader. If you include John Williams with that, then really you're sitting among a great, creative sound that, to me, makes me a richer person. So to do this occasionally, as I do, is very refreshing.

So your own company is your primary vehicle?

Nowadays, of course, yes. I do a lot of things with my company. I was determined that, when I'd made some success on my own, I would try to bring the same quality to my first love, working with others. I wanted to produce serious flamenco, deep, committed, pure flamenco, something I saw the big companies weren't doing. We started with a small group, just four people, and it was successful right from the beginning. Since then, my company has grown.

That was Flamenco Puro?

Yes, at that time and for many years it was called Flamenco Puro, and it grew for many years, but always with the same idea - to be puro, not gratuitous virtuosity, but always a deep commitment to flamenco. That has always been my philosophy in presenting shows, even though my company's bigger now. It's a wonderful kind of music making, to think about how you present those kinds of ideas.

I get the sense that you present the concept of puro mostly to as a challenge to yourself to commit to a certain approach to flamenco rather than a way of telling the world that what you do is the real stuff and the work of others is not.

Yes, precisely. I have to feel the movement, the waves of what the music is doing to me, then I trust that it projects out to the audience. It's not the other way around.

I take it the "Missa Flamenca" is part of this effort.

Yes it was, again, thinking up new ideas and yet retaining this commitment to the purity of flamenco and the transcendental feelings that I feel for it. It was interesting to do a work that is emotional and includes the classical instrument of the choir, but retains the heart of flamenco. It was a commission. In Poland, they asked me if I could do something religious in flamenco for a festival of religious music. I was overwhelmed by the idea, but eventually I saw that a Mass would do it. I wanted to do something extra, not just flamenco people singing.

I've known a lot of people to have been affected by it. It's a very strong work.

Thank you. I get invited to do it all over the place. People are always very moved, and that is what I try to do with music.

Tell me a little about your current company. There's the new CD Arte Y Pasión.

Yes, that was my last show but one. It was a very successful show. You get the good and bad things of a live performance. You never get right sound and all kinds of things happen, but on the other hand you get the vibrancy of playing for a live audience. Since then, I've done another show which is another departure for me which hasn't been to the United States yet, it's called Musa Gitana. It's a dance theatre work about a painter from Córdoba named Julio Romero de Torres who painted very beautiful women. He lived at the beginning of the century and is an icon, almost a folk tradition in Córdoba, a very colorful figure. He fascinated me since I was a child. I created a story based on a dramatic incident in his life. One of the women he painted was a gypsy dancer. Her boyfriend killed her because she posed nude for the painting. It's a very simple story, but very dramatic. The underlying idea I tried to portray was the concept, not original with me, that the artist, in trying to capture his subject and keep them alive in his art, interferes with the life of the subject.

Is there dialog?

No, just singing and dance. We used projections of Torres' paintings to bring the audience into his work. I created new songs for the show and as well as a touch of folk songs by a composer who had influenced me as a child, Ramón Medina. When I was a teenager in Córdoba there was a musical peña around Medina; he used to sing about the beautiful things in Córdoba. The show was very successful and ran for seven weeks in the West End of London.

Have you ever been tempted to use any of the works of Lorca?

I have, in fact. That's something in the back of my mind. Of course, so many people have done so many beautiful things with Lorca's work. I wouldn't want to do something that was less than due tribute to an artist like that. So, if I do something, I would like to do something good. The moment may come. If it doesn't, it doesn't.

In creating a solo piece, is a flamenco guitarist a composer, arranger, or archivist?

Why not be all three? I feel very attached to my tradition. Tradition has been my teacher and I cannot disassociate myself from my tradition. Flamenco is my tradition, but it is not mine. I fit in it. Having said that, I'm an individual and in flamenco, you can't just do what is there. You have to try and do something of your own or else you're dead. You look at what other people do, of course, but not as an archivist. I used to study Ricardo and Montoya, as I told you, but then you try to do your own thing with it. You try to compose with the tools of the compás or other elements, you try to change it, but nevertheless keep it.

When you create a piece, is there any improvisation, or is everything worked out in advance?

Of course, there is improvisation, but improvisation within a territory that I'm familiar with. If you're inspired, and technically you've prepared yourself, you can experiment on the spur of the moment, if you feel good. You must feel inspired. You must be dreaming of what you want to do before you can do it. You deal with material you're familiar with, but you tend to surprise yourself as you go along.

Who makes the guitar you play?

Gerundino Fernandez from Almería. It's quite old, 1980, but it's a lovely guitar. It's quite battered, I've used it a lot, but its tone is completely new. It's a wonderful instrument.

What's all the tape on the back and the side?

I've always put something on the guitar to give it friction to keep it from sliding around.

How much time are you spending on tour and where is your home?

I still have a home in London and that's where I tour from. But I have a home in Córdoba as well. My family is in Córdoba. When I'm not working, I'm in Córdoba. When I am working, I'm in London.

Tell me a little about your Centro Flamenco in Córdoba. Is that still going on?

No, it isn't any more. Touring around the world I've discovered a vast amount of people are interested in flamenco. With that in mind, I wanted to create a festival in Córdoba where people from other parts of the world could come. I started the Centro in 1980 to organize the festival. It's well established now and I've passed control over to the local authorities.

Are you still teaching in Rotterdam?

Yes, I'm still teaching there. I go about once a month and see everybody. There are other teachers who are there all the time, but I stay involved to make sure the students are getting the information they need.

What 's next for you?

I'm still fascinated by what I'm doing now. A lot of people ask me to compose other works like the Missa. There's a project in Germany I've been asked to do if which I may accept - a kind of opera. In a few weeks I'm linking up with some Indian musicians to do a few concerts together. And I have a tour of the Missa in Italy in December.

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