

Energetic Shaping In Spanish Flamenco:
Movement Analysis and Music
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SEM 2009

One of the most important skills that a flamenco guitarist (who accompanies dance) must acquire is the ability to analyze and interpret movement. The continuity and synchronization of a performance is dependent upon accurate interpretation of dance movements by the musicians (and of the music by the dancer). After years of accompanying dancers I've noticed that I can watch a dance video with the sound turned off and recognize a lot of significant information from the movement alone, and likewise when listening to the music without the video, the movements of the dancer, to some extent, are "visible." This raises some of the questions that this paper attempts to answer. What information is being conveyed, and how is it being conveyed? How can we "hear" sound from movement alone and "see" movement from sound alone?

I am interested, not only, in understanding how aural information can be conveyed by visual gesture, and conversely how visual information can be transmitted (or at least implied) by aural gesture, but also (by extension) how culture can thereby be embedded in music and dance. My premise is that when the music reflects or embodies the dance movement (as it does in flamenco) analytical tools designed for dance become applicable to the music.

I am looking for meaning in the gestures of the music itself, as well as in the gestures of the dance, and for relationships between the two. As Timothy Cooley has pointed out in the important book "Shadows in the Field" searching for "meaning in music" is akin to "chasing shadows" (3). This is an appropriate analogy. Shadows, in a sense, represent that which casts

them. Gestural meaning involves references to movement, a body, or to a metaphoric domain.¹ When music conveys significance, it is usually when it is perceived as the *shadow* of a body, when it is perceived as gestural.

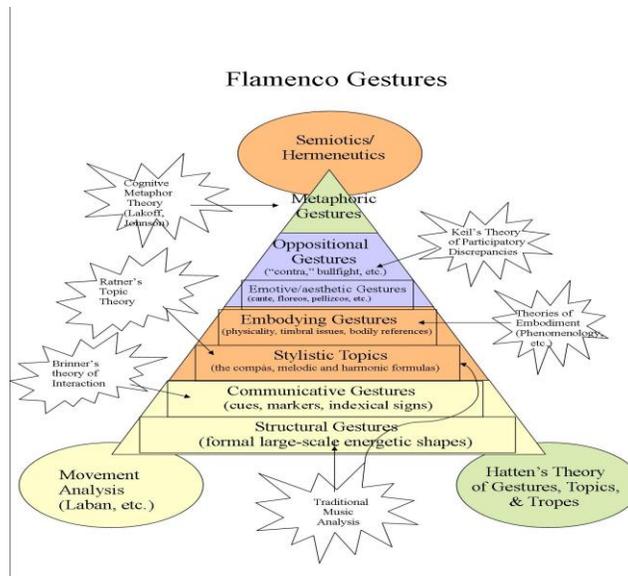
Musical Gesture

There are a number of theorists who have explored the issue of how *music itself* conveys significance through its identification with gesture. David Lidov, for example, has stated that “music is significant only if we identify perceived sonorous motion with somatic experience” (1987: 70).² This sort of identification is facilitated by the fact that (as William Echard puts it) “there are structural iconicities between energetic states of musical sound and energetic states of the body” (Echard, 1999:7) Formal aspects of music, through their identification with bodily gestures become musical gestures that mean something. Flamenco music is dance music, and as such, is readily identified with bodily movement, even in an instrumental context. Flamenco music is readily perceived as gestural, and therefore readily perceived as meaningful.

In my dissertation, I interpret the many types of flamenco gestures from several theoretical standpoints, and also by applying principles from movement analysis to the music itself, which is the topic of this paper.

¹ It is symbolic, indexical, or iconic.

² Cited in Cumming (2000), pg. 134.



My working definition of gesture, and much of my approach to flamenco gestural analysis is borrowed from the theories of Robert Hatten. Hatten defines *human* gesture rather inclusively as “any energetic shaping through time that may be interpreted as significant,” (2006:1)³ and musical gesture as “significant energetic shaping of sound through time” (2004:94).

I am not a flamenco dancer or a Laban movement analyst, though as an accompanist of dancers for many years, I’ve become acquainted with the movement vocabulary. For the purpose of characterizing flamenco movements in Laban terms, I am relying in part on the writings of Adair Landborn, who is both a flamenco dancer and a certified Laban movement analyst, and on consultations with Amy Milanor, another experienced Laban analyst, and friend. In her dissertation which compares the movements of the dance with those of the bullfight, Landborn identifies a series of “movement motifs” common to both, and discusses their shared

³ For a more extensive 12-point definition, see Hatten 2004: 93-95.

cultural values. I will use some of these movement motifs as a starting point, and extend the discussion into the corresponding gestural vocabulary of the music itself.

First, I will quickly summarize some of the Laban terminology and conceptual framework that I am utilizing. Central to the Laban system of movement analysis are the concepts of Effort and Shape. Effort has to do with the expressive dynamics of movement, how the body concentrates its' exertion. It can also be described as "the energy content of action"(Goodridge, 133). Shape is the correlate of effort: how it manifests visually in the body. The concepts of Effort and Shape, correspond (it seems to me) to Hatten's definition of gesture. If gesture is "energetic shaping" than effort (as the energy content of action) is the raw material of gesture, and shape is the visual or auditory result. Laban movement analysis is concerned with analyzing effort (and attitudes toward it) from the point of view of four measureable factors—flow, weight, time, and space. Musical gesture (as well as visual gesture) can be understood in relation to these factors. The phrasing of the dance and the music exhibit corresponding attitudes toward the effort factor of flow, for example. There are corresponding standards for stopping, going, controlling, releasing, continuity, and interruption, all of which can be represented on the continuum between what Laban calls "bound vs. free" flow. The effort factors of weight and time relate to rhythm and dynamics in both the dance and the music. While the effort factor of space may appear to be a visual or tactile domain, I (like Hatten, Echard, and others) am interested in the human capacity for "intermodal synthesis," the "interactivity of representation, via mapping of analogous energetic shaping through time across the visual, aural, tactile and motor realms" (Hatten, 2), which allows

musical elements to create a sense of virtual space and to exhibit effort factors within that space.

In general, flamenco dance and music exhibits what Laban called the “fighting efforts” or “condensed efforts”-- strong, direct, quick, and controlled movement efforts. Both the music and dance favor what “impactive phrasing,” phrasing that builds dramatically to emphatic climaxes through the fighting efforts, followed by moments of release and recovery, before building again.

One of the most obvious characteristics of flamenco movement (exhibited by the posture and much of the movement vocabulary of flamenco dance) is what Laban analysis calls *peripheral spatial tension*. The term *spatial tension* is used to characterize the directional inclinations of motion initiated by tensions or countertensions within one’s personal space or *kinesphere* (visualized as a sphere, or icosahedron surrounding the body).



Movements which draw inward or push outward, passing through the center of the kinesphere exhibit *central spatial tension*. Movements that traverse and call attention to the space between the center and the edge are called *transversals*, exhibiting *transverse spatial tension*. Lines of motion that stay on the periphery or call attention to the distance between the center and edge of the kinesphere exhibit *peripheral spatial tension*, which is what we see most in flamenco.

Peripheral Spatial Tension



Flamenco posture stresses *verticality*, and oppositional movements between the upper and lower body—simultaneous and contradictory spatial intentions. (quoting from Landborn) “The attitude of the performer toward the effort factors of time, weight, space, and flow is expressed in entirely opposing ways by the upper and lower body” (317).



Verticality (Lia Ochoa)



Simultaneous and Contradictory Spatial Intentions⁴

⁴ The feet are moving rapidly, while the arms and upper body are nearly motionless. This is the typical movement motif of the *subida*.

The term *oposiciones* is used to describe the basic flamenco stance, involving the “placement or movement of the arms or legs in counter direction to each other” (Matteo, 140), Oppositional counter-tension (*oposiciones*) is apparent in the “twisting movement motif,” referred to as *Torcido*.



Torcido (Lia Ochoa)

In a previous paper, presented at the 2007 convention, entitled *The Contra Gesture and the Value of Opposition in Spanish Flamenco*, I outlined some of the musical practices that reveal oppositional aesthetics in much the same way that these dance movements do—the high value placed on working against the beat in *contra-tiempo* (or syncopation) *with melodies such as this:*

As played by Ramon Del Paso
(transcribed by S. Mullins)

Guitar

and the similar value placed on what I called *contra-harmony*—chords which involve clashing notes a step apart—*such as these*:

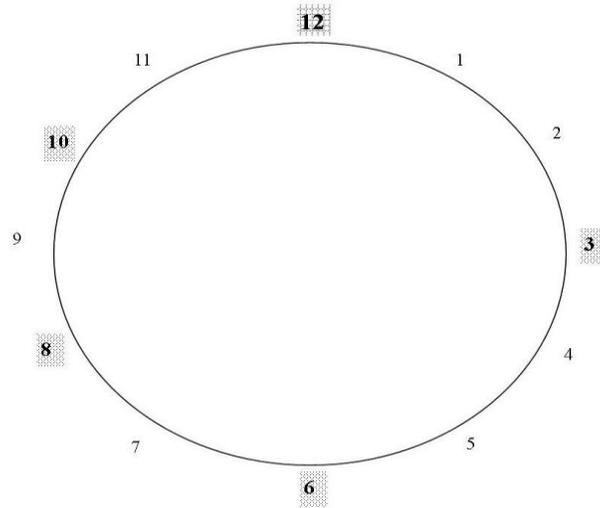
Guitar

Dm13 Dm9 Dm11 Dm11 Dm13 C9 C9 C9 B^b(add11)
 B^b(add11) B^b7(add11) B[#]9(add11) B^bM7(add11) B[#]9(add11) B^baug(add11) FM7(add6) FM7(add6)

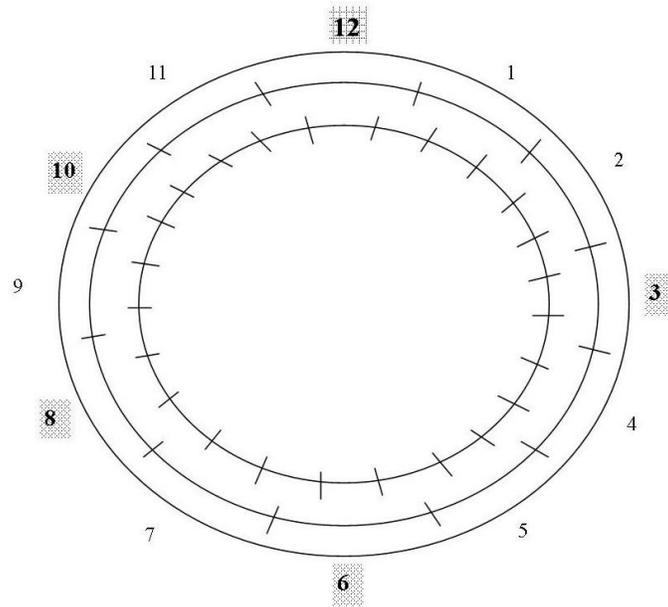
I hypothesized that these oppositional musical practices are closely related to social values--- the positive role of conflict, taking risks, facing death, as also revealed in the bullfight. To extend that discussion in Laban and Hatten’s terms, we might look at the rhythmic cycle or compás as a virtual kinesphere, and the preponderance of contra-tiempo as tension on the periphery of that “space.” –*powerpoint*

This represents the beats and accent patterns of many of the 12-beat genres, and this represents the added counter-tension of *contra-tiempo*.

The rhythmic cycle (*compás*) as kinesphere:



With *contratiempo*:



Of course, this visual representation is metaphoric, but the compás does create a sense of virtual orientation, while circumscribing the possible (or at least likely) motion within the musical “space.” The compás establishes an edge, or periphery, and the syncopation creates tension which calls attention to that edge. Similarly, the modal “space” established by standard harmonic patterns is acted upon with oppositional efforts or “peripheral tensions” with the added dissonances of the contra-chord voicings—the first example is the standard Phrygian chord progression of much of flamenco, and the 2nd involves the added tension of the more-dissonant contra chords.

The Harmony as Kinesphere:



With Countertension:



Another characteristic of flamenco dance is the way in which the arms are often held in a sort of isometric tension, pushing downward against some apparent but unseen force. Movements of the arms in general are called *braceos*, and it's no coincidence that the verb *bracear* also means, "to struggle." In Laban terms, this can be described again as peripheral spatial tension, with clear expression of countertension.



Braceos (Gina Martinez)



(Lia Ochoa)

The music often establishes a sense of tension and counter-tension that is analogous to this bracing of the arms and torso. One class of musical gestures that illustrate this connection is what I'm calling *static bracing motifs*. These often occur as introductory mood-setting melodies in buleria or other 12-beat palos. They are static in the sense that they involve little

or no harmonic change along with a repeating ostinato melody. The melody is typically six beats (or ½ of the rhythmic cycle) in length, and is repeated or slightly varied in the second half of the compás. The melody has a different relationship to the beat in the two halves of the cycle: the first with its' two compound subdivision (or 6/8) and the 2nd with three simple subdivisions (3/4)⁵. If the 12-beat compás (or rhythmic cycle) is envisioned as a sort of virtual kinesphere, tension is created (on the metaphoric periphery) by the hemiola—the melodies contrasting relationships with the two beat patterns. Counter-tensions are often simultaneously exerted by other internal hemiolas and contra-accents. Like the “contradictory spatial intentions,” and “striking separation between the upper and lower body” in the dance (Landborn), the music illustrates separate *aural intentions*, with two or more differing levels of activity and rhythmic density.



This is an opening falseta to a Guajira, as performed by Chuscales. It involves a melodic/rhythmic pattern in the 1st half of the compás (the 1st six beats) that is repeated (sequentially) in the 2nd but is heard differently because of its' differing relationship to the metric accents, as I described. The melodic pattern in each half further divides into two equal parts, each three beats long. In the first half that division corresponds to the duple accents (the 2 dotted half-notes), but in the second half it becomes a hemiola against the triple accents (the three quarters). This creates a sense of movement from relaxation to tension (from the 1st half of the compás to the 2nd half). A similar muscular-like flexing is occurring simultaneously in the

⁵ As described earlier in regard to the discrepant quality of the compás itself.

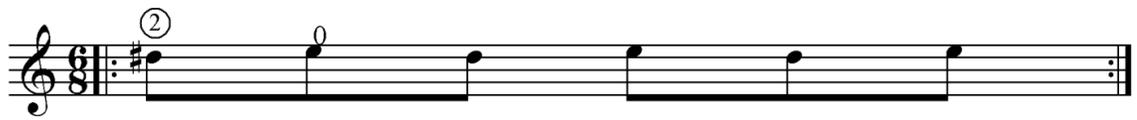
opposite direction—tension to relaxation—within each half of the melody. The first three melody tones (b-a# -b) are placed in *contratiempo* (syncopated) creating a sense of tension, while the following two (a#-b) fall on the beat, resolving that tension. This creates a counter-tension similar to the bracing depicted before.

Another important movement motif involving peripheral and transverse spatial tension is “arching,” and its’ corresponding implication (in Laban terms) of *nearness*.



This posture represents nearness to the bull, and by implication, nearness to death. The gesture, as Landborn puts it “ is emblematic of the matador’s overall predicament.....caught between the exigencies of pleasing the public (by drawing the bull near) and the dire necessity of evading death (by maintaining distance)”(253).

This sort of “arching nearness” has a musical analog in the contra-chords that I mentioned. Interestingly, these chords are sometimes referred to as “horned chords.” Awareness of the *nearness of the horn*, or the dissonant tone, is commonly amplified by insistent melodic repetitions of the two clashing tones in the chord. This establishes tension, which may be further amplified by the rhythmic placement of the adjacent tones in a hemiola



The following examples illustrate a typical arpeggio pattern that is frequently applied to contra chords to amplify the confrontational tension---the nearness of the bull.



There is a value in flamenco placed on unpredictability and interruption which is apparent in the music, as well as in the dance. The class of dance gesture called *queiebro* or *suertes*, represent interruptions of movement, iconic of the matador “dodging the bull.”



The dodging mis-direction of the dance gestures has a number of musical analogs. These can be rhythmic, harmonic, or timbral. One of the common features of flamenco rhythm is the tendency to rapidly fluctuate the rhythmic density, i.e. to subdivide the beat in a variety of ways within a short span of time. If the dance gestures are a sort of deliberate misdirection of visual attention comparable to the strategy of the bullfighter, this musical “flourishing of the cape” serves to similarly misdirect auditory attention. It is often difficult, particularly in palos with slower tempos, to perceive a regular beat, because of this inconsistency of subdivision, along with the prevalence of syncopated accents.



This example of one of the standard topics of soleá employs five different rhythmic densities within the first six beats.

Unexpected harmonic changes also illustrate the value of surprise and unpredictability. There are numerous musical metaphors founded on harmonic surprise, for example. It is common, for palos in the Spanish Phrygian modality to conclude by shifting to the parallel major key, and for Major-key genres to do the reverse. Major-key palos utilize shifts to the Phrygian to signal temporal/sequential events, and Phrygian-mode palos use shifts to the major for the same purpose. The harmonic shifts function as one sort of stylistic temporal coding (Hatten). Major vs. Phrygian modes are oppositionally marked gestural types with temporal implications. The educated flamenco listener is aware of the temporal meaning of these harmonic events, what they signal and what should follow. Expectation is conditioned in this way, and therefore troping becomes possible. Put simply, whenever an expected sequence of events is disrupted

or reordered, meaning emerges. This is what Robert Hatten calls “the troping of temporality.” (2006, 4).

There are many other stylistic temporal codes in flamenco. Llamadas are one example.



The Movement Sequence of a llama (Jeanette Trujillo-Lucero)

The traditional role of a llama is to call for subsequent action. Llamadas traditionally are short—one cycle of the compás in duration. It is not uncommon in modern flamenco performances, however, for the gestures of the llama to be repeated several times in succession, creating what could be analyzed as a new section of the dance. The traditional communicative and temporal function of the gesture is replaced with a new emergent meaning. An aesthetic effect is created that is dependent on an awareness of the original meaning and the trope. This sort of perseveration, looping, repeating of a “call,” creates an incongruity or minimalistic effect, that is only experienced by those that are aware of the original meaning of the gesture.

Conclusion

There are many other movement motifs and musical analogs that time constraints prevent me from discussing fully. Let me just mention a few--- spiraling and trailing motives are common in the dance and the music.



The spiraling of the guitarist's hand in a continuous rasqueado is similar to the impactful phrasing of the dancer, building tension toward an emphatic climax. The tendency with singers or guitarists to extend cadences can also be heard as a sort of spiraling, like the dancer delaying the inevitable end of a phrase, or as a trailing off, similar to the dancer's bata de cola.

A simple, unextended cadence:



The same cadence extended:



There are hand movements known as floreos, and the guitar technique by the same name.



There are also movement motifs in the cante, such as what is known as *tirar pa' dentro*, literally, 'to pull towards the inside'; indicating (metaphorically) how the sound should be pulled inward and then released.



Many gestures are iconic of the bullfight, for example—the flourishing of the cape (or skirt), lunging movements to incite the bull (or the audience), or the trailing of the cape or *bata de cola*.



This is not just a case of dramatic mimicry. There are (as Landborn states) “intrinsic movement correlations” between flamenco dance and the bullfight, based on a shared “deeper source of movement intentions, impulses, and responses.” (Landborn, 297). It is my contention that there are also “intrinsic movement correlations” between the music and the dance which, again, reflect a shared source of movement intentions.