

**The *Contra* Gesture  
and the Value of Opposition  
in Spanish Flamenco**

**Steve Mullins  
University of Colorado  
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## Introduction

I would like to begin by quoting Federico Garcia Lorca, the poet laureate of flamenco. In his famous essay “Play and Theory of the *Duende*” he describes the mysterious force called *duende*, at the heart of the aesthetic experience--a sort of immediacy of inspiration, and directness of communication between performer and audience in flamenco, the bullfight, and other arts. He often describes the relationship between the artist and his or her *duende* in oppositional terms—“the true fight is with the *duende*,” he says (51). He refers to “hand-to-hand-combat” between an artist and her *duende* (53), and adds: “with idea, sound, and gesture, the *duende* enjoys fighting the creator on the very rim of the well,” (58).<sup>1</sup> This image of balancing on the “rim of the well,” creating art through opposition, with an awareness of immanent death, is inherently Spanish. My objective in this paper is to demonstrate and clarify some ways in which oppositional gestures suffuse Spanish flamenco--from minute musical practices and dance postures, to politics and issues of identity. On many levels, there is a value placed on fighting “on the very rim of the well.”

My enquiry into this topic began with a simple question---what is most valued in a flamenco performance? Answers to this question (offered by flamenco artists) often include some reference to the idea of *contra*, or *contra-tiempo*. A good dancer, for example, is expected to demonstrate clear and “clean” *contra*. A good flamenco melody (*falsetta*) is one that employs the proper amount of *contra*. The term *contra* means *against*, and in common usage it means “against the beat” or *syncopation*. The accenting

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<sup>1</sup> Others have likened *duende* to “a dance on a tightrope stretched to breaking point. It can never be achieved without risk on both sides.” (Leblon, 1995:21).

of “off-beats” is crucial to establishing a proper flamenco feeling or “*aire*.” What I’ve realized is that there are other characteristics of the music that have a similar quality of contrariness, and that these qualities reflect similar values in the society at large.

Before examining *contra* gestures in the music and dance more closely, I will summarize some of the existing scholarship regarding this issue of oppositional values in Spanish society and flamenco. David Gilmore (for example) has written a book entitled *Aggression and Community: Paradoxes of Andalusian Culture*, in which he identifies a number of “andalusian antinomies,” or “bipolarities,”-- ways in which the Andalusian worldview is polarized and dualistic, in regard to class, politics, gender, religion, the natural world, and human relationships in general. Emotional ambivalence, combativeness, and mutual hostility, are not only omnipresent in Spanish society, but according to Gilmore they are (paradoxically) the very things which serve to unite society-members into a “community of mutual involvement.” (Gilmore, 8-9).

Poles of opposition in regard to flamenco often involve issues of identity. One important debate has to do with the notions of origin, ethnicity, and exactly whose identity flamenco represents—Spanish, Andalusian, or Gypsy. Many scholars (Mitchell, Baltanas, Steingress) have attempted to downplay the Gypsy ethnicity of flamenco, claiming that this was an “invention” or a manifestation of “Romantic Orientalism.” They emphasize instead, the hybrid and uniquely Andalusian character of the art form. While it is clear that flamenco is a hybrid product of Southern Spain, the need to assert the Andalusian over the Gypsy may be overlooking the music itself (see Leblon) and may represent a subtle form of racism—an attempt to erase the already-marginalized Gypsy, even from the margins of history.

The stereotypical and romanticized popular image of the Gypsy has certainly played a part in the popularization of flamenco. I would argue that this is so, in part, because of the oppositional stance-embodied in that image. The Gypsy is seen as free, independent, and the victim of oppression. *Gitanismo*, which lies at the heart of flamenco popularity, represents what Baltanas calls “an archetype of dissidence” (Baltanas, 151). Lorca saw the gypsy as “the embodiment of protest, the impossibility of the assimilation of the individual by the system” (Ibid, 152)

The extent to which flamenco ethnicity may or may not have been “invented,” doesn’t make it any less “real” as William Washabaugh has pointed out (Washabaugh, 1996:77). Historical issues of origin, pedigree, or purity, may be irrelevant, except to the degree in which they influence the social construction of reality today, and in Spain today, that is an oppositional reality, with considerable racial tension (if not racism) in the flamenco world.

To what degree flamenco came to represent opposition to Franco’s regime has also been widely debated. Franco attempted to appropriate flamenco for its’ touristic value, and as a symbol of Spanish nationalism. For some, that appropriation transformed flamenco into “a propaganda element of the first magnitude”(Grau and Jordan, 2000:154), or “the emblem of all that is regressive in Spanish culture” (D’Lugo, 1991:34).<sup>2</sup> The fact is, flamenco also came to be associated with “resistance to Franco’s dictatorship” (Washabaugh: xiii). Flamenco provided “a means of opposing monolithic notions of nationality” (Baltanas, 2002: 151) and fueled the regional tension between Andalucia and the seat of the centralist government in Madrid. “In effect, the Gypsy

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in Washabaugh 1996: xiii.

came to be utilized in the imagination of the anti-Franco Left as a symbol or metaphor of the opposition to the dictatorship.”(Ibid).

Other poles of opposition include issues of gender, authenticity, public versus private, and traditional versus modern. Timothy Malefyt has equated the two prevalent modes of representation in flamenco (the *tablaos* and *peña* traditions, the public and private) with male and female roles in Spanish society. The public side of flamenco he associates with the ‘male’—claiming that “Andalusian men are resigned to defensive posturing among each other” (57). By contrast, the *peña* tradition is representative of the female model of social relations—a more intimate, cooperative, and non-competitive model. *Penas* are private flamenco clubs, emphasizing intimate expression, usually between men singing to one another.<sup>3</sup> The *pena* to many has also become a symbol of local “authentic” flamenco, in opposition to the public “inauthentic” variety (the female versus the male). Interestingly, men are the principle participants in the so-called “feminine” model, and women find their place in the flamenco world primarily in the “masculine” mode of representation. Men get to be more emotional, affectionate, and expressive in the *peña*, while women can be more aggressive, competitive, and *macho* on the flamenco stage.

The issue of authenticity often involves an opposition between the old and the new. New Flamenco is considered by many to be ‘inauthentic.’ Modern artists have expanded the harmonic vocabulary, experimented with new timbres, combined genres,

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<sup>3</sup> . My first experience of a *cantaor* emotively singing directly to me, only inches in front of my face, (while a bit intimidating) made me realize that this mode of flamenco can only truly exist in that intimate way. It is a two-sided communicative event. The singer depends on the receptivity of a fully engaged and captive listener. The song is not what is important, rather the value is in the communicative interaction between two human beings.

etc.. New Flamenco (or ‘flamenco fusion’) on the one hand exists as an opposition to traditional flamenco, yet on the other it is merely a logical continuation of the oppositional practices of that tradition<sup>4</sup>. Steingress has pointed out that “many of the peculiarities of contemporary flamenco are based on the transgressive and transcultural character of flamenco itself” (206). The old and new are united in their oppositional aesthetics--the celebration of personal risk, defiance, and innovation, in the value placed on “fighting on the rim of the well.”

I’d like to move now to a discussion of musical characteristics and procedures, along with some dance gestures that could be classified as oppositional (or *contra*) with the idea that these are reflective of the socio-cultural values and oppositionality that I’ve just summarized.

Spanish flamenco is often rhythmically very complex. Many of the genres are based on rhythmic cycles, often of twelve beats, with irregular accents. The underlying rhythmic structure of a given genre or *palo* is known as its *compás*. *Buleria*, for example, uses a 12-beat *compás* made up of two 3-beat groupings followed by three 2-beat

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<sup>4</sup> What I consider New Flamenco would include artists like Paco De Lucia, Gerardo Nunez, Vicente Amigo, Tomatito, etc., who continue to perform traditional flamenco *palos* but in new ways. The authenticity argument of course extends to other ‘pop’ artists such as The Gypsy Kings, or the so-called Flamenco Nouveau of Ottmar Liebert. In both of these cases, the fact that they concentrate on the more accessible binary rhythms of Rumba Flamenca, while avoiding the more complex *palos*, and avoiding much of the contra emphasis that I’m discussing would argue for their “inauthenticity.” Ideologies surrounding the concept of “authenticity” can often be prejudicial and ethnocentric. For example, I once had the opportunity to join a group of flamenco dancers performing with the Gypsy Kings. After the performance a fan approached one of the dancers and asked her if she spoke the Gypsy language, and after she replied that she did not, he berated her for having the audacity to perform “flamenco” with the Gypsy Kings without such knowledge. The fan’s stance was illogical, of course, on several counts--To cite an ethnic or linguistic criteria for authenticity was ironic given the fact that the members of the Gypsy Kings are *French* gypsies themselves, performing a hybrid style that in Spain is considered “inauthentic” by most flamencos—especially by the Gypsies. Also, the history of flamenco includes countless non-gypsy performers who did not speak Caló or Romany, and finally the fact that the gypsy language in Andalusia--Caló is itself a rather modern invention (which some claim is not a Romany dialect, but rather Spanish with a few Romany words thrown in) (Mitchell, 58); finally, the vast majority of flamenco lyrics are in Spanish.

groupings (*see example one*). The strong beats of the cycle are often emphasized by the guitarist with *golpe* (tapping on the top of the guitar) and with corresponding chord changes on those accented beats. In addition, the upbeats are filled in with an upward motion of the index finger. This upbeat emphasis is often accentuated melodically, as in *example two*, where the b-flat tones are added to the chords on each successive upbeat. This enlivens the beat-structure and gives it the subtle swing that is characteristic of *buleria*

Example #1: Buleria compás w/o contra accents

Example 2: Buleria compás with contra accents

*Contratiempo* is integral to the *basic* feel of *buleria* and many other genres. The *compás* comes to life, so to speak, only when it is activated by the *contratiempo*. When a performer interprets a genre, *contratiempo* also becomes a means of demonstrating his or her artistry and command thereof. Melodies, likewise, are enlivened by their *contra* placement. Example 3 is a *tangos* falsetta that I often teach to guitar students to illustrate the idea of *contra*-placement of a melody. The first of the three melodic passages (*falsettas*) is notated with the melody placed on the beat in a decidedly “non-flamenco”

way. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> versions take the same melody but places it in *contratiempo*, in effect transforming it into a flamenco melody.

*Example Three: Tangos Falsetta*

#1. No Contra

Guitar

#2. Contra Anticipation of each downbeat.

#3. Mostly-Contra Version

Example 4 is a *buleria falsetta* that I learned in Granada from my teacher there—Ramon del Paso. It is a good illustration of flamenco values—it sounds (on the surface)



very simple, but is actually very difficult to execute or transcribe, because of the subtle use of *contratiempo*.

*Example Four: Buleria Falsetta*

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

Guitar

4

7

10

13

**Part Two: *Contra-Harmonia***

Flamenco harmony, like flamenco rhythm, is very oppositional. First, there is a tendency (particularly for modern flamenco artists) to embellish consonant chords with neighboring chromatic dissonances. In Example five we see two versions of the harmony to a passage of *Alegria* (which is one of the few *palos* of flamenco performed in a major

key). The first (and traditional) version simply uses the tonic and dominant chords, set to the same 12-beat *compás* as *buleria*. The second version embellishes the two principle chords with other chromatic chords and secondary Phrygian cadences (in a more modern way).

*Example Five: Alegria Harmony*

#1. Standard harmony

Guitar

#2 Variation w/ secondary chords & "phrygianizations"

Modern flamenco borrows harmonic vocabulary from jazz, but I would argue that the flamenco use of such harmony differs from jazz, in that it is less directional or functional (not as often based on tonal movement by 4<sup>th</sup>). It is instead used more as a *contra*-device, creating opposition and tension within the flamenco system of parallel modality, and as a way to oppose and “*phrygian-ize*,” so-to speak, any given chord.

In addition to oppositional chords a half step apart, another important quality of flamenco harmony is the inclusion of dissonant notes within chords. This typically involves open (unfretted) guitar strings clashing *against* another tone a step away. Flamenco harmony is idiomatic to the guitar, and this sound of open-strings ringing in opposition to neighboring fretted notes is a central feature. Flamenco guitarists typically play in a very limited number of keys (or modes), at least in terms of fingering—often

using the capo (*sejilla*) to play in many actual modalities while utilizing the fingerings of very few. This is a way to exploit the tuning of the guitar and its limited possibilities for using strings in the oppositional way that I've described. The two most common fingerings are what are known as *por medio* and *por arriba*, which refer to actual positioning on the guitar neck—*por medio* or in the middle, and *por arriba*—on top. Both the *por medio* and *por arriba* harmonizations of the Spanish Phrygian mode allow for chord voicings on the guitar that utilize open-strings to clash against a fretted tone a step away---what I'm calling *contra* chords. The Bb chord in A-Spanish Phrygian, for example, typically includes the open e-string, clashing against the fretted d-note a step below. The F chord in E-Spanish Phrygian likewise contains the open b-string clashing against the fretted a-note a step below. There are countless other contra-chords within the flamenco harmonic vocabulary. In an attempt to actually count them, I examined a number of traditional and modern musical examples and quickly found over 100 such chord voicings—see example six. Again, what I am calling a contra-chord is a chord that includes at least one, and up to three pairs of notes either a half step or a whole-step apart, with one member of each pair being voiced on an open string. Many of these chords help define specific *palos*, for example the chord in measure 81 (F#11b9) is the central sound of *tarantas* and *tarantos*, the Bm13 just above it in measure 74 is commonly heard in *granainas*. When I say F#11b9 or Bm13, of course I'm using jazz vocabulary. These sorts of labels are not part of the discursive consciousness of most flamenco performers. There isn't a harmonic theory per se. The tuning, number of strings, and physicality of the guitar, along with the value placed on opposition is what generates this harmonic vocabulary.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “Traditional” flamenco accounts for many of these examples, and “modern” flamenco has added many more. I

## Example #6: *Contra Chords*

The image displays a guitar score for 'Contra Chords' consisting of ten staves of music. Each staff contains a series of chords, each with a diagram above it showing the fretboard and string positions. The chords are labeled with their names and any specific techniques like '5fr.', '10fr.', '7fr.', '8fr.', '18fr.', '4fr.', '5fr.', '7fr.', and '6fr.'. The staves are numbered 10, 18, 26, 34, 40, and 46. The music is written in a single melodic line on a guitar staff.

would argue that modern flamenco harmony is a natural and logical outgrowth of traditional flamenco values and practices. In fact much of the development of modern flamenco harmony can be seen as a search for more “contra-chords.” Vicente Amigo, for example, has often deviated from tradition by playing *palos* that are normally performed *por medio* or *por arriba* in d#-Spanish Phrygian instead. While this is considered somewhat radical in flamenco circles, it is logical in the sense that this is one of the few modal options on the guitar that continues to allow for a number of contra-chords (rivaling the traditional fingerings)—see Example 6 measures--88 to 100. Some of these are new additions to the flamenco harmonic vocabulary but they make sense and are “flamenco sounding” because they contain the important clashes between open and closed strings.<sup>5</sup> Some have argued that modern flamenco is “inauthentic,” or “corrupted” by jazz and other influences. My contention is that modern flamenco is a natural

Em9 Emb9 Em13(b9b11) Emb9b11 Em13(b9b11) Emb9 Em M7  
 53  
 Em9 Em(add13) Em9 Em M7 Em13#11 Em#11 Em11b9  
 60  
 E(#11 no3) GM7(add6) G13 Gaug(add6) B11b9 B13 B11b9  
 67  
 Bm13 Bm7b9add11 Bm11 Bm9 F#11b9 F#11b9 F#sus(b9)  
 74  
 F#11b9(no3) F#aug7 F#aug7 F#aug7 F#7b9 C#m7(b5) AM(add9)  
 81  
 EM7(no3rd) EM7 D#b9(no3rd) D#b9(no3rd) BM7(add11) D#mb9 D#b9  
 88  
 D#b9 BM7(add11) D#7b9 G#m7b6 G#mb6 D11 Cm7(+M3) Cm(addb11)  
 96

continuation of the flamenco tradition. The “traditional” and the “modern” are unified by the strong value they each place on the “oppositional,” in rhythm, harmony, and attitude.

## Dance

I would like to turn now to the dance and issues of movement in flamenco. Besides the emphasis on footwork in *contratiempo*, there are a number of other gestures that could be classified as oppositional. In fact, 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). Another important technique is what is referred to as *Torcido*, and I quote from Matteo, a scholar of Spanish dance, and his definition of the term:

“Probably the dominant characteristic of Andalusian and flamenco dancing, namely, the torque or spiraling action of the chest and upper torso against the pelvis. This twist (*torcido*) is even further amplified by arm movements (*braceos*), which seem to flow in nonstop circles and curves, reaching away from but always returning toward the body. This oppositional play of movements (*oposiciones*), although basic and essential, is one of the most difficult techniques for the classically trained ballet dancer to acquire. (Ibid, 242).



*Torcido*

Another dominant characteristic of flamenco dance that distinguishes it from Spanish classical 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.



Gina Martinez (*braceos*)

Movements of the arms in general are called *braceos*, and it's no coincidence that the verb *bracear* also means, "to struggle." The flamenco dance instructor whose class I accompany in the dance department at CU (Sali Gutierrez), while describing this technique, recently made the comment to her students that "if it doesn't hurt, you're not doing it right."

Another class of oppositional dance gestures involves movements borrowed from the bullfight, known as *toreando* or *tauromaquia*. These include motions representing a flourishing of the cape—*la Veronica*, torero turns—*vuelta torera*, dodging motions, called *quiebros* or *suertes*, and also the basic stance of the male dancer which is at times synonymous with that of the *torero*, with his lifted chest, and pelvis thrust forward (see photo below). The same values that are represented in the bullfight, are reflected in flamenco---the value of facing and opposing death and despair, the value of "fighting on the very rim of the well."



*La Veronica* gesture in the bullfight and the dance (Marisol Moreno)



To conclude, I want to discuss an approach that I intend to pursue in upcoming research, which is to undertake a semiotic or gestural analysis along the lines of Nattiez, Lidov, Cumming, and Hatten, in order to uncover other examples of what could be called “contra gestures.” In short, the various *palos* (or genres) of flamenco have established what Hatten calls “topics,” and some of the modern deviations (or contra gestures--such as suddenly including chords from the *por arriba* modality in a *por medio palo*, or combining genres in other unexpected ways) function as “tropes,” or musical metaphors. The stylistic conventions of each of the genres have become standardized over time--melodies, topical conventions, harmonic motions, and rhythmic patterns and their



emotive connotations have become imbedded in the psyches of the flamenco Interpretive Community (Fish, 1987), such that they can now be troped. Flamenco music has become stylized to the point that the expectations established by convention now provide another level of *contra* possibility.<sup>6</sup> Risk and innovation are valued in flamenco, but in order to be appreciated, there must be established expectations. In other words, there must be an interpretive community capable of recognizing the “meaning” of a given “topic,” or gesture, and therefore capable of recognizing “tropes” or gestures that operate *contra* to conventional meanings. At the simplest level, the flamenco interpretive community is expected to be aware of the rhythmic structure or *compás* so that they can appreciate the artistry of the *contratiempo* working against it. They are aware of the communication taking place between the dancer and the guitarists—the *llamadas* (calls) and other signals, so that they can evaluate the spontaneity and sensitivity of the performer’s interactions (which are sometimes cooperative, and sometimes oppositional). They are aware of the meaning of dance gestures—their relationship to the bullfight, and so on, and I might also add that, even in the instrumental music (without a dancer) such gestures are audible, and in a sense visible in the imaginations of the educated listener.

In order to appreciate *contra* gestures, we need to be aware of what they are *contra* to, what they are opposing—whether it’s the beat, the tonal center, gender roles, or the Franco regime. To fully appreciate someone “fighting on the very rim of the well” we must first look into the depths of that well, and I hope that this paper has begun to shine a small light in that direction.

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<sup>6</sup> . Leonard Meyer elucidated his Theory of Expectations some fifty years ago, in which he correlates the cognition of emotion and meaning with musical structures and the way in which they satisfy or defy expectation (Meyer, 1956), and Hatten’s theory of topics, tropes, and gestures, helps explain the musical and cognitive mechanisms involved in such a process.