

“Baile Flamenco” DVD
Reviewed by Greg Skala

Note: this is the third review I have written for submission to the Flamenco De La Isla Society and the first one in which I've attempted to make extensive use of correct flamenco terminology. Here, at the outset, is a glossary which may be of help to some readers.

Alegrías: a light-hearted dance from the Cadiz area of southern Spain
Baile: dance
bailaor: male dancer
bailaora: female dancer
bata de cola: dress with a train
braceo: arm movements
cantaor: male singer
cantaora: female singer
cante: song
cante chico: light style song
cante grande: solemn style song
cante intermedio: medium intensity style song
cante jondo: equivalent to cante grande or even more dark and solemn
Caracoles: a song and dance type with elements of both Cadiz and Madrid history
compás: rhythm of the musical bar or measure
cuadro: group of performers
falseta: melodic variation on guitar
floreo: hand movements
Garrotin: a rather light-hearted number from northern Spain
guitarra: guitar
jaleo: exclamations of encouragement or praise
palmas: rhythmic clapping
palmera: a female providing palmas
palmero: a male providing palmas
palmeros: males or a mixed-gender group providing palmas
Romerías: a dance similar to Alegrías
Siguriyas (also spelled Siguriyas): a dark, mournful number of Castilian origin
Soleá: a number exemplifying loneliness, sometimes referred to as the “mother of flamenco”
Tangos: a lively number with undertones of seriousness
Tarantos: a dance based on Andalusian song and related to Tangos
Tientos: a majestic number, sometimes referred to as the “father of flamenco”
tocaor: guitarist
toque: guitar playing
zapateado: footwork generally, though also a particular dance not featured on the present DVD

On the “Baile Flamenco” DVD I recently borrowed from the Flamenco De La Isla Society's library, eight performances are included, some produced on darkened interior stages, some out-of-doors, and the last one in a night club setting. Variety and an effective presentation order are strong suits. Ranging through the types of cante jondo, cante grande, cante intermedio, and cante chico, examples of twelve-beat compás and four-beat compás are intermingled, keeping the ninety-minute DVD engaging and intriguing. As a viewer, I was not allowed to settle into any “groove” of expectations.

I appreciated 90% of what was presented on this DVD. I would have preferred to have had more of the performers credited by name, and I would have preferred to have seen more women included in the cuadros. Lighting and image sharpness were not always excellent, though the flamenco performances certainly were. I imagine that the DVD was copied from a television programme or perhaps from more than one. The venues and settings, as mentioned above, were varied. Cutting the producers of the disc a bit of slack, I will acknowledge that I first began to love flamenco in my childhood, over sixty years ago, often watching low-quality black-and-white films broadcast over WTTW (Window to the World), a very early predecessor of today's Public Television. That station's "cultural exchange" programmes from Spain, presented with little explanation and no sub-titles, were dark, mysterious, and sometimes incomplete. One certainly can learn to focus on superb artistry even when video quality is dubious.

I urge all members of the society to borrow and enjoy discs from our fine library. Trying to watch intently enough to write one's own review can provide an extra level of enjoyment, too. I would be delighted to find out if other members agree or disagree with my impressions of the disc "Baile Flamenco." Below are my comments on the eight included performances. Readers might wish, though, to borrow the DVD first and view it for themselves before reading further and possibly becoming too influenced by my own biases and tastes.

1. Joaquin Grilo, the only bailaor featured on this DVD, danced Romeras, a twelve-beat number, very confidently, deserving extra commendation for more deft handwork than one often gets to see from a man dancing flamenco. His footwork was great, too. His turns and spins were precise. He demonstrated some pleasing humour via expressions and gestures near the end of the Romeras, just before discarding his red jacket straight upwards and then catching it with panache. The other performers who backed up Joaquin were clearly competent, too, though the cantaor's cante chico was somewhat minimal. He sang clearly and appropriately, but I'd have liked to have heard more. The amplification provided was uneven, adequate for the cante, palmas, and Joaquin's zapateado, though at too low a level for the three guitarists, especially the one farthest stage left, closest to the palmeros. He played his guitarra with obvious vigour, but I saw, more than heard, his contributions.

2. The cantaor accompanying Siguriyas was my favourite singer on the DVD. His voice "wept" pathos. To my ear, his singing fit the cante jondo designation. I wish I knew his name, but only Concha Vargas, who danced this number as an uneven five-beat piece, was named on the DVD. For her part, by exuding fierce anger, she complemented and yet contrasted with the mood struck by the cantaor. She started out in a chair, and her flying feet even while seated were so energetic that I thought the chair must surely collapse. There was no let-up even after she stalked to the middle of the floor. What a powerful dancer!

3. Next came a Garrotin (four-beat and cante chico) that wowed me, primarily because of one of the two tocaors involved and because of graceful, long-limbed Marie Pages, who danced it. All of the guitarists on the DVD were good, of course, but the dark-haired member of this "two-toque team" excelled as the author of falsetas that were complex, fluid, "jam-packed," and ever in control. After I'd watched the DVD through for a first time, I made a note to myself that Maria's Garrotin was the sexiest dance on the disc. I had thought this was because of her mesmerizing floreo and the braceo. Then, watching again a second time, I had to laugh at myself, now noticing that, near the end of the number, she had shaken loose a petticoat ribbon which had flapped and flashed at the bottom edge of her dress. A sober observation would be that it could have tripped her, but I found myself wondering if that ribbon had communicated a subliminal cue that things were getting wild.

4. Bailaora Lalo Tejada, featured next in a Tientos (four-beat and cante intermedio) earned full marks for both her fast, surprisingly light footwork and for her costume. Her purple dress clung just enough, suited her complexion well, and moved well, complemented by her purple shoes. The cantaor member of the supporting cuadro was genuinely expressive.

5. Next, in Tarantos, the bailaora's costume was again a key highlight. Milagros Mengibar wore a black dress with white polka-dots, the very full skirt of which rippled dramatically. The compás was definitely four-beat, and my personal inclination is to identify the song as cante jondo. Though two cantaors participated, accompaniment was otherwise understated but effective, with guitarra played by a single tocaor and with the punctuation of fairly scant palmas.

6. I had never seen a Caracoles performed before, and this twelve-beat cante chico number was a charming treat! Teamwork was evident between two cantaors trading off the lines of the song seamlessly, as well as sometimes singing together. Bailaora La Tona, with her bata de cola and fan, gave a very spirited interpretation of the piece. She and the cantaors drew close together at times, looking soulfully into each other's eyes; and, at the end, La Tona took one of them gently by the shoulder as they made a dramatic exit together.

7. Next presented was an emotional Soleá (twelve-beat and cante grande). The net effect of the coordinated interactions of the bailaora, two cantaors, two palmeros, and a tocaor was such that, had these performers been a jazz combo, I'd have praised their group as "tight." Loud and clear jaleo was prominent during the Soleá, much of it provided by one woman among the palmeros. Ana Parilla, the featured dancer, created nimble zapateado and twisting floreo that were truly impressive.

8. A Tangos in a night club setting was the concluding performance on the DVD. For this four-beat cante chico, as in the immediately previous number, one woman assisted with palmas in the cuadro. Carmelilla Montoya was the featured bailaora, and she also served as her own cantaora. She was good in both roles. The presence of a microphone on a tall stand set up at the front of the dance floor did not seem to interfere with her movements. Possibly trying to counteract the prominence of that microphone, though, whoever was serving as cameraperson overused double-images, with close-ups of Carmelilla superimposed on wide-angle views. In my opinion, these were distracting. The quality of the sound recording was also, unfortunately, inconsistent.

Respectfully submitted,
Greg Skala