

perspectives on paco peña

Nobody has done more than Paco Peña to bring the true spirit of flamenco to audiences all over the world.

With imagination, dedication and skill, he constantly renews the impact of this archetypal Spanish art form, expanding its horizons, yet never losing touch with its visceral emotion.

As guitarist, composer, dramatist and mentor, he builds inventively on deep foundations, revealing new perspectives on the essentials of flamenco.

paco peña the guitarist

"Apart from the human voice, the guitar is the only musical instrument used in traditional flamenco," explains Paco Peña. "It can be both lyrical and highly percussive, adapting itself to the nuances of flamenco song and bonding itself with the voice to produce a true blend of West and East."

Paco Peña began playing his brother's guitar at the age of six, making his first professional appearance at the age of twelve and then touring with flamenco groups in Spain. His reputation as a soloist was first established in London: "I couldn't believe how popular solo flamenco guitar could be. Strange though it may seem, guitarists in Spain simply didn't give concerts on their own."

Carnegie Hall in New York; the Royal Albert Hall in London; the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam and the Opera House in Sydney ... Recitals in venues like these have helped take Peña's name far beyond the circle of flamenco aficionados. Through joint concerts with major names among fellow-guitarists, singers and instrumental groups, he has forged fruitful links with other genres: classical, jazz, blues, Latin American and country.

For all his achievements as a soloist, playing with singers and dancers remains vital to Peña. On stage with his own flamenco company he assumes a dual role, firing the inspiration of his colleagues and providing an anchor for the whole ensemble.

paco peña el cordobés

The city of Córdoba, Paco Peña's birthplace, embodies the historical and cultural cross-currents that define Andalucía and flamenco. Famed for its magnificent Moorish and Roman monuments, lush patios, poets and artists, the city has recognised Peña's achievements with a special honour, the *Potro de Oro* (Golden Colt). He still makes his home in Córdoba for part of the year.

Peña grew up in a family of nine children that shared a house with several other families. Music was very much part of his childhood. "At any kind of celebration there was always music and singing. Relatives and parents always like to show off their children, so they would ask me to sing for them ... I was rather shy, but via the guitar I found I could express what I was feeling and wanting to say. It gave me a focus. ... I would spend long hours practising. To be able to play guitar on those warm evenings after a day in school was just wonderful."

In 1981 he founded the Centro Flamenco Paco Peña in Córdoba, later becoming Artistic Director of the Córdoba International Guitar Festival. "I wanted to build a bridge between the rest of the world and the region of my birth. For anyone wanting to learn flamenco, seeking to appreciate it to the full, there is no substitute for the potent atmosphere of Andalucía."



paco peña the company man

When his Flamenco Dance Company performs on stage, Paco Peña blends discreetly into the ensemble, yet his vision is indisputably the company's motive force. "I've always aimed to give audiences flamenco that has passion and art. Above all, it must have truth. When I formed the company in 1970 there were other flamenco companies touring the world, but at that time they seemed more concerned with spectacle than with the form I knew and loved. I decided to gather together a few other performers and present the art as I saw it and felt it. It was time to return to the roots of flamenco."

That authenticity of spirit has driven the company's artistic explorations. Spanish audiences, for whom flamenco is second nature, greet performances with the same enthusiasm as festival-goers in Istanbul, Adelaide or Hong Kong.

Flamenco has long been integral to Andalucía's way of life"

The group's artistic vistas have expanded progressively. Out of those early shows grew *Flamenco Puro*, *The Art of Flamenco* and the essential *Flamenco in Concert*. In recent years Peña, his singers, guitarists and dancers have realised such ambitious projects as *Arte y Pasión*,

Musa Gitana (based on the life and work of the painter Julio Romero de Torres), and *Misa Flamenca*, an interpretation of the Mass that brings a classical choir into the mix. Autumn 2002 brings a new show, *FLAMENCO - Voces y Ecos*. The next stages in this flamenco evolution are a requiem and a commission for the opera stage.

"The depth of feeling – and the tragedy of flamenco's history – is always there. We take flamenco very seriously, not least the singing. The singers are the greatest source of inspiration for all of us, whether dancers or guitarists," says Peña, stressing the cooperative nature of the enterprise. "They trigger our emotional and creative responses."

paco peña the mentor

"Paco Peña's talent-spotting is as brilliant as his fingering," wrote a London journalist recently. Indeed, a constant stream of exciting young performers has come to international prominence through his Flamenco Dance Company.

Peña finds new artists for his company on his travels around Spain, where flamenco thrives in specialist clubs. Newcomers join forces with people who have spent years working with Peña. The philosophy is that no single element or artist should dominate a performance: everything must become part of the total artistic and expressive picture.

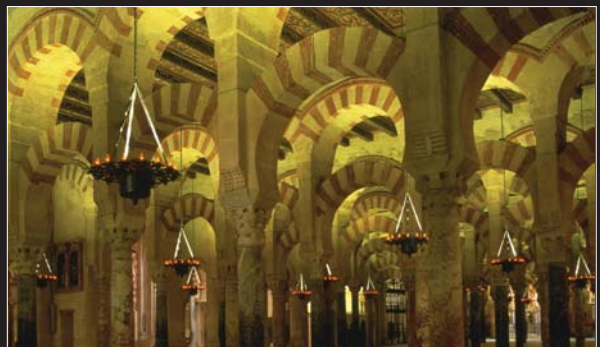
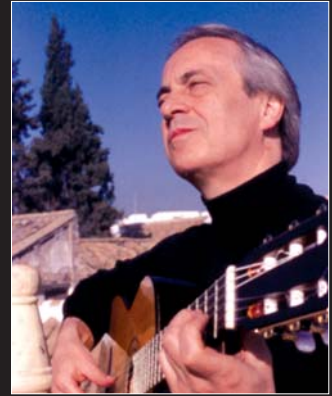
"We have a lot of young people in the company," says Peña, "and that's a happy situation. I like to show off the exuberance of youth, the happy-to-be-alive feeling of young people performing flamenco. I like their talent, but also the promise they bring for the future."

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paco peña what is flamenco?

Flamenco is an improvised form that uses voice, guitar, hand-clapping and dance to create an eruption of emotion ... passion, pathos, joy and rebellion.

The evolution of flamenco is bound up with the history of Andalucía, where over the centuries Europe has mingled with Africa, the Middle East, Asia and the Americas. Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Celts, Moors, Jews and Gypsies made their home in the region, whose unique melting pot of cultures found expression in diverse forms: the brilliance of Arabic and Moorish art; the works of great literary figures like Seneca, Maimónides and Lorca, and the music and dance of flamenco.

Cante flamenco – the deep flamenco cry – first came from the throats of the Gypsies. They had arrived in Spain from India in the 15th century. Assimilating the folklore, folksongs and dances of Andalucía, and drawing on their own nomadic life and the hardships of peasants and refugees, the Gypsies produced a new existential voice.

Transformed through the influence of flamenco song, Andalusian dance came to run the full gamut of emotions, from the anguish of the *seguriya* and *soleare* to the sensuality of the *tango* or the taunting irony of the *bulería*. Each song or dance in flamenco carries its own expressive charge and specific style. Flamenco captures emotions within a strict structure, the *compás*, which the artist uses as the framework for highly personal variations. It is this element of improvisation that makes each performance truly alive and unique.

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paco peña biography

Paco Peña embodies both authenticity and innovation in flamenco. As guitarist, composer, dramatist, producer and artistic mentor he has transformed perceptions of this archetypal Spanish art form.

Born in the Andalucian city of Córdoba, Paco Peña began learning guitar from his brother at the age of six and made his first professional appearance at the age of 12. In the late 1960s he left Spain for London, where his recitals of flamenco music captured the public imagination.

Venues for his solo performances have included the intimate Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club and the monumental Royal Albert Hall in London, New York's Carnegie Hall and the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. He has shared the stage with fellow-guitarists, singers and instrumental groups, bridging diverse musical genres, including classical, jazz, blues, country and Latin American.

In 1995 The New York Times declared that: "Mr Peña is a virtuoso, capable of dazzling an audience beyond the frets of mortal man. He combines rapid-fire flourishes with a colourist's sense of shading; this listener cannot recall hearing any guitarist with a more assured mastery of his instrument." It should come as no surprise that readers of America's *Guitar* magazine judged Paco Peña Best Flamenco Guitarist of the Year for five consecutive years.

In 1981 he founded the Centro Flamenco Paco Peña in Córdoba, later becoming Artistic Director of the Córdoba International Guitar Festival. Plans are underway for a new educational initiative in Peña's hometown, complementing his work as the world's first Professor of Flamenco Guitar, a role established in 1985 at Rotterdam Conservatory in the Netherlands.

Since 1970 Paco Peña has performed regularly with his own hand-picked company of dancers, guitarists and singers in a succession of groundbreaking shows. The Paco Peña Flamenco Dance Company has taken flamenco into the realm of music-theatre with regular seasons in London (Royal Festival Hall, Sadler's Wells Theatre and Barbican) and festival appearances in Edinburgh, Adelaide, Amsterdam, Athens, Israel, Istanbul, Singapore and Hong Kong. 1999 brought the most ambitious production yet: *Musa Gitana*. Peña based the piece on the life and work of another artist from Córdoba, the painter Julio Romero de Torres. Its seven-week season at the Peacock Theatre in London's West End stands as the longest-ever run of a flamenco show and a further London season followed in Spring 2001.

Another landmark was *Misa Flamenca*, a 1991 setting of the Mass that juxtaposed Peña's company with a classical choir. Its premiere at London's Royal Festival Hall, given with the Choir of the Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields, was followed by a staging at the 1992 EXPO in Seville. *Misa Flamenca* has also been seen in Australia, New Zealand, Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and the USA. Paco Peña has further plans to marry flamenco with the forms and forces of classical music.

Paco Peña is based in London, but still spends a significant part of the year in his native Andalucía. In 1997 he was proud to be named *Oficial de la Cruz de la Orden del Merito Civil*, an honour bestowed by King Juan Carlos of Spain.

For more information

MPM London
mpm@pacopena.com

Telephone +44 (0) 20 7681 7475
Fax +44 (0) 20 7681 7476

Impresariaat Wim Visser
Ruysdaelkade 5
1072 AG Amsterdam
The Netherlands
art@iww.nl

Telephone + 31 (0) 20 6233 700
Fax + 31 (0) 20 6208 212