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Song of the Outcasts: An Introduction to Flamenco [Book review]

Antoni Pizà
CUNY Graduate Center

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Lightnin' Wells, Wesley Wilkes, Denise Duffy, and Tobias Munthe, along with a foreword by B. B. King and dust jacket endorsements by a number of high profile people in the music and entertainment business. With the exception of about a dozen musicians who are given more than two pages, the profiles of the artists are superficial, while a few written by Peter Cooper are annoying for their excessive raving about the artists' talents and castigation of the world for its neglect of them.

The text contains a few errors, such as, the song title "Tricks Ain't Working [instead of "Walking"] No More" (p. 27), Walter (instead of Lester) Melrose (p. 53), Billy Eckstein (instead of Eckstine, p. 103), and the Chahron (instead of Chatmon) family (p. 125). Some of these mistakes may have been committed by the interviewees. On p. 119 there is a poorly transcribed song text by Jack Owens, and on p. 163 there is a mention of bluegrass music occurring before the 1940s. Elder James Goins' music is simplistically described as "a combination of ancient African musical traditions and early African-American gospel sounds" (p. 69). More serious are some other statements that are actually misleading. Duffy claims credit for arranging for the 91-year-old Jack Owens to perform at a festival in Utrecht, Holland, in 1995 but gets the story wrong (p. 119). I know this because the festival, which had long been trying to book Owens, contacted me directly about it and had me help get his passport and travel with him after Duffy was unable to make the arrangements. And although Duffy acknowledges the work of researchers Peter B. Lowry, George Mitchell, Glenn Hinson, and Bruce Bastin "whose trails I followed" (p. 194), he fails to make clear that these researchers made recordings and promoted records and concerts by many of the same artists decades earlier, instead leaving the impression that Duffy and MMRF have come to and worked with this music for the first time.

DAVID EVANS

The University of Memphis

Song of the Outcasts: An Introduction to Flamenco. By Robin Totton. Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 2003. [224 p. ISBN 1-57467-080-8. \$19.95.] Illustrations, index, bibliography, discography, compact disc.

tions, index, bibliography, discography, compact disc.

To my knowledge there are only a handful of musical styles that can arouse feelings as deep and enthusiastic as flamenco. (The only possible rival is opera, I have to admit.) I pity the innocent and vulnerable music-lover who might dare express a public opinion, especially in writing, about a *cantaor* (singer), a *tocaor* (player), a recording or a book. There will always be someone alarmingly fanatical with radically different views who is ready for a verbal assault. Visit the numerous forums and discussion lists on the Internet and see the vehement and heated arguments on, say, a particular guitarist, his use of the capodaster, his unique *rastreado* (strumming), his inimitable *falsetas* (interludes). Classical-music lovers could only wish their music was *this* important. Granted: moderation is not the *forte* of flamenco enthusiasts—and perhaps it shouldn't be.

Robin Totton's *Song of The Outcasts: An Introduction to Flamenco* is actually a judicious, balanced overview of flamenco, its styles, history, and practitioners. And although its author is very passionate about his subject matter, facts and opinions are not blurred or mystified, but rather presented with clarity and concision (in only 224 pages). Totton defines himself as an "explainer by trade" (p. 12), and explain he does. The challenge, though, is to explain verbally an art form that defines itself around the notion of ineffability. Flamenco (and not only flamenco, of course) thrives on the idea that it is beyond words. Concepts such as the popular (and by many accounts clichéd) *duende*, as well as *aire*, *rajo*, *desgarro* and many others are non-quantifiable characteristics and therefore cannot be defined precisely. Even strictly musical terms seem to have different or even contradictory meanings. Consider, for example, *compás* or *palo*; whereas most writers agree on the basic meaning of these terms (12-beat measure and song form, respectively), these are only rough definitions of their many possible connotations.

Attempting to define *compás*—and, by extension, I believe, referring to flamenco in general—Totton writes: "I am aware of how inadequate the words are to convey what happens, and perhaps you don't even need

to know, in order to enjoy flamenco song and dance." Flamenco culture, he believes, is "not based on reason but [is] one in which emotion and instinct dominate in life and are expressed and fulfilled in art" (p. 23). "Andalusians," he adds, ". . . are instinctual and emotional first, and rational only after. They are characterized by spontaneous emotion, uninhibitedly expressed" (p. 24). Such words would certainly make Totton appear to be a romantic traveler describing an exotic Other—and his personal story (from Oxford to flamenco-drenched Jérez de la Frontera) would doubtlessly support this supposition. This is not the case at all, however: Totton, the explainer, genuinely struggles with the elusiveness of his subject matter and the inadequacy of words to explicate it.

Admittedly, the need to explain is his main motivation for writing. The fact, however, that, until recently, there were not many flamenco handbooks in English did not help his endeavor. Each language, one could argue, has its own way of breaking in a subject. Writers build on what has been said before, even if it is to dismantle earlier arguments. Serious flamenco commentators in English, thus, do not have the benefit of a previous writing tradition. Neither do those in Spanish, one might add, since so much flamenco writing has traditionally been impressionistic rather than systematic. Flamenco, moreover, suffers from a chicken-and-egg syndrome: the music is not discussed and systematized because it is believed to be ineffable or elusive; and it keeps being elusive, because it is not discussed and systematized.

Hence, in clear, agile English, Totton traverses the intricacies of flamenco through seven chapters and five appendices. The first and last chapters are ancillary to the main bulk and include an introduction ("Why? What? Where? Who?") and an extra chapter ("Who Are the Gypsies of Andalusia?") that offers an overview of the history of the Andalusian Gypsies (*gitanos*) and their contribution to flamenco. Framed by these two sections, the book's main body includes three chapters (chaps. 2, 3, and 4) for each one of the fundamental aspects of flamenco, namely song, dance, and guitar. Chapter 5 ("The Song Forms") is a guide to the accompanying compact disc. Here Totton shows some of

his best skills as an explainer. He takes one by one each song form or *palo* (*toná*, *siguiriyá*, *soleá*, *bulería*, *tiento-tango*, *peteneras*, etc.) and discusses the lyrics, harmony, rhythm and so forth of each track, very much as music appreciation textbooks help students navigate through a basic sonata form or a piano etude. (I have used these guides in a classroom and they work perfectly in music appreciation and world music undergraduate courses.)

Totton, as a matter of fact, is very much a pedagogue when explaining flamenco. He believes, unlike many practical musicians, that explanations of music help listeners to enjoy it—at least for people like him. There are however, different modes of listening and the "instinctual" mode, so prevalent among many flamenco practitioners, seems to be at odds with Totton's attempt to provide a systematic method of understanding flamenco. Although his intentions are to enhance appreciation through understanding, Totton also has a wider agenda that includes clearing up many misconceptions. He asserts that flamenco is more than the dance many people are familiar with; flamenco is not the only, or even the most widely spread, Spanish folk or popular music, but rather a music phenomenon mostly confined to Andalusia and cities where Andalusians have migrated. Totton acknowledges the essential influence of the Gypsies in the creation and, even more importantly, the dissemination of flamenco, but other cultural groups are also recognized. Needless to say, he establishes the difference between *real* flamenco and the tourist fare many visitors to Spain are familiar with. In a nutshell, most of these observations are addressed to the general, curious reader, not specialists or even the hard-minded, over-enthusiastic fans. Because of the book's assumed readership, there are no music examples or music theory terms, but there is an abundance of photographs (most of them taken by the author), a few diagrams (for the different *palos*), and the aforementioned 21-track compact disc.

One issue that is equally debated among experts and amateurs, as well as scholars and practitioners, is the future of flamenco. Chapter 6, "Where Is Flamenco Heading?" deals with the dichotomy between the "pure" *cante jondo* (deep song) and the many fla-

menco fusions. Tradition has it that flamenco was in its origins only *cante*, that is, unaccompanied singing. The guitar accompaniment (often based on a simple and effective descending phrase in the Phrygian or Andalusian mode, e.g. A-G-F-E) came after. Dance and especially flashy *tablaos* dance came even later and many consider it a nuisance, only apt for *guiris* (foreigners). Solo guitar was uncommon until relatively recently, and masters such as Paco de Lucía became internationally known only in the 1970s and even later. Flamenco fusion (the mix with jazz, rock, pop, and so-called world music) had a great deal to do with his success. De Lucía played with American guitar masters and included the Peruvian *cajón* (percussion box). Could he have ever been an international star had he stayed in Spain as Camarón's accompanist playing only traditional, say, *soleás* and *siguiriyas*? Would the band Ketama be known in Europe and, to a lesser extent, in the U.S., had they not incorporated elements of pop and world music? With prudence, Totton believes that many innovations and fusions will last, but not all.

The five appendices present a vast amount of useful information, but they should have been organized differently. Appendices 1 and 3 are, respectively, a glossary and an annotated bibliography. The latter includes books, magazines, videos, compact discs and, incongruously, critical considerations about guitarists and singers. This information should have been placed in a different section. Appendix 2 is a guide, scene by scene, to the celebrated film *Flamenco* by Carlos Saura. This could be a useful teaching tool but should be a complement to Chapter 5 "The Song Forms," which is also a guide to the compact disc. Appendix 4, "Sources and Addresses," presents selected information about festivals, *peñas* (clubs), websites, and (again) magazines. Appendix 5 includes the credits for the compact disc (shouldn't one just call this "Credits?"). Remarkably, Totton taped many of the recordings himself, but commercially released recordings are also included. A few editing errors have cropped in: Alberti needs no accent and a quote from T. S. Eliot is unnecessarily repeated twice.

As of late, Flamenco has become a very successful industry. Fueled by audiences'

appetite for so-called world music as well as by institutions, flamenco has left the outskirts, shacks, and caves of Andalusian towns and moved to international concert stages, research centers, and universities. This book is also part of this relentless movement towards the internationalization of flamenco. One wonders if the old secrecy and mystery surrounding the art was a central or only a peripheral factor in the creation of this music. Fanatics would doubtlessly argue the former, but for the rest of us Totton's efforts to spread the word are indeed welcome.

ANTONI PIZÀ

City University of New York, Graduate Center

Celtic Modern: Music at the Global Fringe. Edited by Martin Stokes and Philip V. Bohlman. (Europea: Ethnomusicologies and Modernities, 1.) Lanham, MD; Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2003. [vii, 293 p. ISBN 0-8108-4780-9. \$65 (hbk.); ISBN 0-8108-4781-7. \$35 (pbk.)] Index.

This is a collection of nine self-contained articles with introduction and afterward. The traditional musics of Celtic nations are the focus, but popular musics are also covered. Various aspects of "global pop" are discussed as they confront traditional musics, and popular genres are the focus of two of the articles. The book includes an array of viewpoints and methodologies, but has an essential focus: all the musics discussed are united not only by inclusion in the "Celtic" area, but by their position as national musics turned transnational in the postmodern world. Musical style as expressive of, and as implicated in the construction of, various levels of identity is a point of departure. All the articles deal to some extent with the commodification of music, both as style and as symbol; thus they also engage with the commodification of ethnicity. The unifying term "Celtic" is thoroughly critiqued throughout. This volume is not a primer—it does not aim to introduce either the traditional musics or the issues such as essentialism and transnationalism that are discussed. But for even undergraduate students who have had some introduction to the traditional styles, it