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Authenticity, Universality, and Expression in Song: The Case of Flamenco

Peter Manuel

Abstract

This article explores questions of aesthetic expression and meaning in song, focusing in particular on the enigmatic dynamics involved in song's combination of abstract and lyrical dimensions of import. These questions are especially overt and actively debated in flamenco, where an ideology of authenticity and suffering, akin to that in African-American genres such as blues or rap, implies that a singer must draw on certain profound biographical experiences rather than universal emotions. However, the accounts of various performers suggest alternate expressive processes in which singers of any background can use a certain sort of role-playing to generate actual emotions that are transmuted into aesthetic expression.

Key Words

expression; flamenco; music; song

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1. Introduction

Perhaps the single most dominant preoccupation in modern aesthetics has been the attempt to understand the nature of aesthetic experience and the ways it may differ from other forms of experience. This issue has generated a vast amount of scholarly literature on the aesthetics of music that, for all its sophistication, has not produced a genuine consensus on questions of musical meaning and expression. Remarkably, very little of this literature has addressed song or vocal music, instead focusing on abstract instrumental music, perhaps in a

desire to isolate questions of form and expression without the complications introduced by lyrics and their added dimensions of meaning. Entire books are written, with titles such as *Musical Meaning and Expression*, that pursue these themes with great insight and rigor, but without even mentioning, much less addressing, song and its particular dynamics.[1]

In this paper, I attempt to explore some of the analytical enigmas presented by song, using the genre of flamenco as a case study in which these issues are especially overt and actively debated. In particular, flamenco can be of interest because of its persistent, though much contested, ideology of authenticity, which insists that the tragic sentiment of its lyrics can only be properly accessed and conveyed by a singer who has in fact suffered in real life, ideally through poverty. This ideology implies a theory of expression in song, challenging the notion that any vocalist can sing with proper expression by drawing on some universal form of sentiment matching that in the lyrics or by effectively role-playing. Drawing on the statements of some contemporary flamenco singers, I attempt to show how vocalists do indeed seek to draw on real-life experiences, however universal and commonplace these might be, to inhabit the persona of the song lyrics. I further suggest that such a process may be typical of expressive singing, even if some key aspects of expression and reception in song remain enigmatic.

2. Lyrics and aesthetic emotion: general considerations

The extant literature on song, including Jeanette Bicknell's engaging *Philosophy of Song and Singing*, explores how song poses particularly challenging questions of interpretation and expression.[2] Bicknell's scope admirably extends to vernacular and popular forms of song, unlike some earlier studies that restrict their focus to Western art music, with, for example, its specific ontological issues regarding the relation of the precomposed work to its specific performance. Particularly challenging are questions involving how the literal meaning of the lyrics relates to the music's purely formal dimension of meaning. For example, Suzanne Langer's "principle of assimilation" articulates how a song's lyrics effectively become part of the fabric of the music, giving up their independent status as poetry.[3] This observation, however useful, does not address how either a singer or listener may attend to the literal meaning or message of the text. Similarly, Leonard Meyer makes the helpful distinction between "embodied" meaning, generated by purely formal aspects of music, especially its flow of tensions and resolutions, and "referential" meaning, such as extra-musical, non-aesthetic sorts of significance. Examples of

the latter could include nostalgic personal associations a song might provoke or patriotic sentiment inspired by an anthem.[4] Yet Meyer's approach does not address the range of meanings generated by a song's lyrics, leaving open the question: At what point or in what way do listeners' responses to these, or singers' conceptions of them, become referential rather than embodied, or, in neo-Kantian terms, "under-distanced" and extraneous to an appropriately disinterested aesthetic experience?

Obviously, vocal music genres themselves differ in the extent to which they may be text-driven. At one antipode of the continuum lies the narrative ballad, in which an extended text, whose literal meaning is the locus of interest, is intoned to a simple stock tune of little aesthetic import. At the other antipode lies North Indian classical singing, for example, in which the vocalist improvises extended melismas to the non-lexical syllable "a." However, most "song" lies in between these extremes, embodying both text and tune in some sort of hybrid entity, with its own aesthetic dynamics. Similarly, modes of listening may constitute their own sort of continuum. A listener might legitimately enjoy a song while completely ignoring the literal meaning of the text—for example, if being unfamiliar with its language—perhaps appreciating the lyrics at the pre-semantic level of the expressive "semblance of speech" noted by Langer.[5] Alternately, a listener could attend entirely to the song's text as poetry, per se, ignoring the music. Again, however, most listening to vocal music clearly lies somewhere between these antipodes, in some sort of range in which both semantic text meaning and embodied dimensions of purely musical flow operate. Finally, aside from the literal meaning of a song's lyrics, vocal music, especially in vernacular and popular idioms, is particularly likely to be socially embedded to an extent uncharacteristic of art music. In this sense, its aesthetic appreciation is typically bound up with language, ethnicity, lifestyle, and other nonmusical considerations.

3. Ideologies of authenticity

Questions regarding the nature and boundaries of aesthetic expression and responses are particularly salient in the case of genres that have strong auras of authenticity in their image, marketing, and aesthetics. Many musical genres, from K-pop to Bollywood filmsong, have no particular ideology of authenticity, and some, such as glam rock, have an aesthetic of gleeful artifice. However, authenticity is often celebrated when genres originally associated with ethnic or racial subcultures are adopted and arguably corrupted, deformed, and commercialized by mainstream society. Obvious examples are

the originally Afro-American genres of blues and rap. The ideologies of authenticity surrounding such genres are of interest to aesthetics in the way they propose that the universal level of emotion expressiveness and meaning is not sufficient, and that there should be a more specific, concrete, supplementary dimension of meaning, which is variously embodied in the lyrics and the biographical background of the singer.

Joel Rudinow explored some of these issues in an engaging essay, "Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?," and Bicknell, in the aforementioned work, extends the focus of these issues to hip-hop.[6] Fundamental questions may be more precisely posed as: (1) "Do white people have the ethical right to rap or sing the blues?," and (2) "Can white people perform these genres in credible ways, with the proper feeling?" Given the ranks of respected white bluesmen, for example, John Hammond, and rappers, like Eminem, an affirmative answer to the first question has become broadly accepted, such that attention has focused more on the second question. In clarifying the relevant issues, Rudinow articulates what he calls the "Proprietary Argument," which would accord effective ownership of the blues only to black people, and, slightly more plausibly, the "Experiential Access Argument" ("EAA"), which holds that only black people can sing blues credibly because of their collective experience of suffering and perseverance.

This argument could be broadened to mean that a person of any race could rap or sing blues if he or she had experienced requisite forms of adversity. Thus, Eminem, via the semi-autobiographical film, *Eight Mile*, could position himself as a satisfactorily authentic rapper by virtue of his "trailer trash" background and his primarily black peer group as a young man. [7] Proper expressivity, in this aesthetic, entails more than assimilating lyrics into a purely musical fabric of tension, release, and other formal elements, and more than invocation of universal sentiments, but rather depends on the singer's ability to invest the lyrics with an emotional depth rooted in his or her own life, as from being raised, for example, in the ghetto or the Mississippi Delta.

4. The ideology of authenticity in flamenco

Flamenco is another genre with a particularly strong and actively controversial ideology of authenticity, in which, for its adherents, purity is traditionally associated in narrow terms with Gitano (Spanish Gypsy or Roma, pronounced "heetahno") ethnicity and, more broadly, with those who have suffered,

especially through material poverty.[8] The ongoing debate about these issues parallels and in fact predates arguments about authenticity and “realness” in blues and rap, and in some respects presents the parameters in ways that are even more explicit and hence of use to the observer interested in their implications for the field of aesthetics.

Notions of purity and authenticity were explicitly celebrated in flamenco discourse from the very inception of the genre in the 1860s, when, in the southern Spanish province of Andalucía, professional performers, mostly but not only Gitanos, standardized and elaborated extant urban folk styles for consumption by local enthusiasts and tourists seeking exotic Gypsy spectacles. From that era until the present, flamenco has continued to be performed both as a professional concert art, with all the richness of a classical art, and as a quasi-folkloric genre in domestic and primarily Gitano contexts, in which songs, dance moves, and other elements are orally transmitted through generations and cherished as ethnic and family heritage.[9] Musical features and personnel have consistently traveled in both directions along the continuum between these antipodes, in a manner that is largely productive but also generates a certain degree of tension.

The particular nature of flamenco style and its social performance contexts has promoted an ongoing—and controversial—celebration of purity, authenticity, and depth (*jondura*). This ideology is animated by various circumstances. One is the sense that authentic flamenco is found primarily in traditional Gitano family reunions rather than the cabaret or concert hall, where, it is argued, professionals present performances that may be skilled but are lacking in an ineffable depth and expressivity. There is much exoticization and romanticization of the Gypsy hearth as the root of all genuine flamenco, but even the most sober enthusiasts are aware that the primarily Gitano domestic social milieu, however attenuated in modern times, continues to nourish the stage art. Many traditional-minded connoisseurs see flamenco as engaged in a perpetual battle between authentic forms of the art and commercial fads that either dilute it for mainstream Spanish audiences or distort it for the exoticizing tourist gaze. This sentiment intensified during the Franco era, when the regime used sanitized forms of flamenco to promote an international image of a carefree “Spain of the tambourine” (*España de la pandereta*). A related component of the authenticity ideology is the notion that flamenco, and especially the tragic, serious styles of *cante jondo* (“cahn-tay hondo,” or “deep song”), originated as a cry of Gitano persecution and poverty.[10]

Yet another feature that at once promotes and reflects the ideal of authenticity is the *cante jondo* vocal style itself, which is distinctively hyper-dramatic, if not histrionic, with much gesticulation, sweating, anguished facial expressions, and vocal effects akin to sobbing and choking. This is a far cry, as it were, from “Girl from Ipanema,” drowsily intoned by Astrud Gilberto in the persona of someone lazily girl-watching at the beach between naps, cocktail in hand. It is certainly possible to appreciate *cante jondo* as pure musical form, but the melodramatic style also easily enables one to hear it as expressive of some personal tragedy or perhaps the collective memory of centuries of Gitano persecution. This notion has been promoted by some Gitanos, by an entertainment business marketing the genre to exoticizing outsiders, and, perhaps ironically, by connoisseurs who cherish flamenco as a bastion of purity and authenticity in opposition to the commercial music industry. Accompanying this notion has been the idea of a “pure” and quintessentially Gitano-based flamenco, rooted in the Gitano hearth. Thus, for example, a Google image-search for “flamenco puro” (“pure flamenco”) will generate many dozens of album covers, concert posters, and other entities, all in supposed contradistinction to inauthentic forms of the art.

Flamenco’s ideology of authenticity, purity, and depth has taken various forms, some more plausible and common than others. Some can be seen to roughly cohere with the aforementioned arguments articulated by Rudinow, especially his Experiential Access Argument (EAA), according to which (if transposed to Spain) Gitanos, by virtue of their ethnicity, are the only people able to sing *cante jondo* with requisite expressivity. This argument bases its claim of exclusivity not on biological race or ethnicity but on the supposed experience, whether lived or the collective memory, that accompanies it. This notion does in fact enjoy some currency in the flamenco world and accordingly pops up occasionally in conversation and online forums, such as YouTube comments. Its adherents argue that *cante jondo* emerged from the Gitano community as an expression of their collective historical suffering. The vast majority of revered *cante jondo* singers have indeed been Gitanos, many of whom were raised in extended families hosting regular song-and-dance fiestas, in which toddlers as well as octogenarian aunties are singing and dancing flamenco and relishing it as a family and ethnic heritage. However, in such a forum as YouTube comments, whenever someone, whether Gitano or not, advances this racially based EAA, it is roundly and persuasively shouted down by a chorus of connoisseurs, who point to the

significant number of excellent non-Gitano *cante jondo* singers, past and present.

What is still common and most relevant for the present inquiry, is a more moderate version of the EAA that holds that while certain life experiences are necessary in order to sing *cante jondo* with requisite depth and expressivity, these experiences can be undergone by a person of any race or ethnicity, rather than only Gitanos. Specifically, the maxim is "*Hay que pasar fatigas para cantar bien*" ("One must have suffered in order to sing well"). Ideally, one is a Gitano, born in a cave, and enduring poverty and even racist persecution; however, non-Gitanos may also qualify if their formative years have been sufficiently adverse.

This argument is extremely familiar in the flamenco world. It could be said that most flamenco connoisseurs and even artists groan and roll their eyes at its mention. However, quite a few others endorse it, especially older singers who have in fact struggled to survive (particularly in the dismal Franco years) and fans of the same generations who prefer such superannuated performers to younger ones. The opinions of many vocalists are available online, since the list of standard questions an interviewer asks of a singer nowadays typically includes, "Do you believe that one must have suffered in order to sing well?"

Support for this argument is articulated in various ways. One sort of corroboration can be found in the assertions of various elder vocalists that they "sing what they have lived." While such statements imply a certain theory of artistic expression, one could argue that they should be accepted at face value, if the singers interpret their own art as some sort of expression of their life experience. The one-must-suffer argument, however, constitutes a more explicit and extreme articulation of the EAA. Various veteran singers have voiced this sentiment, typically in response to journalists' questions.[11]

A recent articulation of the EAA is that of veteran "flamencologist" Manuel Bohórquez, in his blog essay, "The Suffering of the Singer:"[12]

Does *cante jondo* make sense today? I mean pure singing, not what [contemporary singers] Rocío Márquez or Miguel Poveda do. Mateo Soleá [...] is clear about it: "If you don't suffer, you can't sing well." Manolito de María, the singer from Alcalá, said that he sang because he remembered what he had lived, and the man lived very poorly, poor as a rat in the ruins of the Arab castle of his town. Therefore, he sang differently than [lighter, non-Gitano singers] Antonio Molina or Juan Valderrama. He sang as he had lived. If a singer today sounds like [veteran Gitano singers]

Manolito or Perrate de Utrera, and laments in song like them, then it is just pure mimicry, like a costume, which is what characterizes the *cante* of young people today.

...When you talk to young artists about such life experiences, they don't put any value on it. Some even mock those of us who value them, with the *inexplicable argument that flamenco singing is a universal art*. [emphasis in original]

Mateo, the elderly singer quoted by Bohórquez, himself continued:

The young people of today want to know everything, but they have to learn a lot, and suffer, and this is very important. If you don't suffer, you are not a good singer. [What about today, with so much unemployment, so many problems making ends meet?] No, suffering was before, sixty or seventy years ago, in the time of [various legendary singers]... Those people who were surviving by singing at a cafe, earning a few pesos and running home to bring it to their wives to put on the coffee and buy a bit of bread. Today no one suffers. Or having to sing for some patron whether you felt like it or not ... You have to go hungry to be a good singer.[13]

Modern vocalist Pitingo (A.M. Álvarez), while not insisting on suffering as a prerequisite for singing well, does assert that it affects one's style:

[Flamenco and hunger] used to go hand in hand. Now not anymore, that's why you have to change the lyrics, it doesn't matter anymore if you say, "Oh how I've suffered," because you haven't. Things are fine, when you get home you put on your Canal Plus [TV], your air conditioning, your heating ... Before if one suffered, it was evident in the way of singing. Just like with black people [in the time of the blues].[14]

5. Lyrics and aesthetic emotion in flamenco

Whether plausible or not, the one-must-suffer argument, the debate around it, and the ongoing celebration of purity and authenticity in flamenco can all be seen to pose questions pertaining to still-unresolved issues regarding expression in music and especially song, and the status of universality in aesthetic emotion. Are particular sorts of personal experience, for example, suffering, prerequisites for aesthetic depth and authenticity of lyric expression in a genre like flamenco? In other words, can a universal sort of emotion (longing, suffering) suffice to afford the singer adequate depth of expression? Or does the singer need to be animated by a specific personal experience, especially, intense suffering? At what point do the emotions and personal associations suggested to the listener by the lyrics become non-aesthetic and "under-distanced"? To answer these questions, we may further ask: How do singers

themselves conceive of their expression of emotion in song? What is the role for them of the specific narrative content of the text? In singing the lyrics expressively, are they effectively role-playing or, alternately, engaging a genuine emotion at a purely universal level?

An initial consideration is that most scholars of aesthetics, in addition to most members of the flamenco world, would dismiss the one-must-suffer argument, as mentioned above. More specifically, as is occasionally noted, many of the top flamenco singers, whether Gitano or not, did not endure any particular suffering in their lives. Among many examples, Camarón de la Isla (José Monje, 1950-92), the most renowned *cante jondo* singer of his generation, can be cited. Camarón, by his own account and also that of acquaintances, grew up in perfectly benign circumstances, surrounded by a loving and supportive extended Gitano family. Nevertheless, these questions about the nature of expression in flamenco have been actively debated by Spaniards since the 1950s, if not earlier, with one widely read author stating, "the frontier between reality and fiction in flamenco singing is very subtle." [15]

The nature of aesthetic expressivity in flamenco and the senses in which it may be animated by universal or, alternately, more specific and profound emotional experiences are closely linked to the role of lyrics and the form in which they are envisioned by the singer and apprehended by the listener. As mentioned above, the phenomenon of song is under-theorized in the aesthetic literature. Indeed, it is ironic that while many music scholars writing on such genres as rap, reggae, narrative ballad, or pop music only discuss the lyrics, at the expense of the music, scholars of music aesthetics have tended to focus on abstract parameters of instrumental music and the analytical challenges they present, largely ignoring the specific aesthetic questions posed by song, including how lyrics can explicitly present their own dimension of meaning and what the role of this cognitive content is in the musical work. [16] The possibility that either singer or listener may engage with that meaning on different levels raises obvious questions about distancing and the boundaries of purely (or properly?) aesthetic experience. Further, if one of the primary objections to the Expression Theory was that a deceased composer such as Mozart cannot tell us what (if anything) he meant to express, matters may be complicated by the ability of intelligent, reflective, and articulate singers in a genre like flamenco to describe how they envision their aesthetic process. Naturally, however, scholars of aesthetics reserve the right to question and interpret the statements of performers, especially considering that the

academic community itself has yet to reach a consensus on such basic matters as the nature of aesthetic meaning in music and other arts.

A modicum of basic information may be appropriate at this point. A typical flamenco stage item, of perhaps ten minutes, might consist of a series of four or five short verses (*coplas*) that are thematically independent and unrelated and punctuated by guitar interludes. Typically, the verses are orally transmitted, and, in most cases, they are traditional and are familiar to flamenco enthusiasts. Though many are compiled in anthologies or websites, the *coplas* are not expected to excel as poetry, per se; rather, as has often been noted of song lyrics, they are created to be sung, to be assimilated into the musical fabric, and to be thematically suitable in being typically open and epigrammatic in nature.[17] In *cante jondo*, most involve heartbreak, longing, or loss. A few typical examples of *coplas* are as follows:

¿A quién le contaré yo / las fatigas que estoy pasando?

se la' voy a contar a la tierra /cuando me esten enterrando

To whom shall I tell my sufferings?

I'll tell the earth when they are burying me.

El carrito de los muertos pasó por allí

como llevaba la manita fuera yo la conocí

The cart laden with the dead passed by

I recognized her by her hand dangling out.

A un anciano le pegué porque me faltó en la calle

y el año, cuando me enteré

que ese hombre era mi padre, gotas de sangre lloré

I slapped an old man who was rude to me in the street

And the year I learned that he was my father, I wept tears of blood.

The importance of the semantic content of the lyrics may naturally vary, both in the mind of singer and the listener.[18] A listener may certainly enjoy flamenco while not attending to or even understanding the words. Flamenco, in its prodigious melodic and rhythmic richness, works perfectly well as abstract music, in which the lyrics provide a “semblance of speech” that can generate some of the expressivity of utterance without

literal meaning. Even a purist, “one-must-suffer” listener such as Bohórquez could claim to hear and relish the pathos in the singing, even if not attending to the lyrics on the semantic level. Accordingly, a veteran vocalist who claims, “I sing what I’ve lived,” could be envisioning her or his expressivity on the abstract rather than semantic level of meaning, with the lyrics effectively assimilated into the expressive flow of the music.

However, in flamenco, as in many forms of song, attending to the semantic meaning of the lyrics can certainly enrich the enjoyment with an added dimension of import. Accordingly, both singers and listeners do often, and perhaps usually, engage with the text, including its literal meaning and the powerful real-life personal associations and experiences that it may evoke. The brevity, simplicity, and familiarity of lyrics to listeners do not prevent them from being experienced as powerful and intrinsic parts of the art form. Langer’s principle of assimilation, in which the lyrics become part of the fabric of the ebb and flow of the song, may be astute in its way but fails to address the cognitive content of the lyrics.[19] Fundamental aesthetic questions remain: At what level, and in what way, does the singer attend to the literal meaning of the lyrics? Does the vocalist seek and find a universality in their content or must she or he engage with the specific circumstance and drama that the lyrics portray? If the latter, is the engagement in the nature of role-playing or does the singer generate a certain sort of genuine emotion, perhaps along the lines of method acting or what Langer might call “ardor for the import conveyed?”

What some vocalists seem to articulate is an expressive process in which they do role-play, in the sense of envisioning the character portrayed by the lyrics, but they do so in order to generate a sentiment that, with proper aesthetic distancing, can animate their singing. Fosforito (Antonio Fernández Díaz), a well-known contemporary vocalist, articulates the process succinctly, noting both the immersion in the character portrayed and also the aesthetic distancing: “A singer is a bit of an actor and knows how to put himself in the situation, but if you let yourself get carried away by anguish, by the pains of the day, you can die in that sadness.”[20]

Many singers, in addition to some flamencologists,[21] would endorse the plausible supposition that both singer and listener can relate to tragic lyrics on the basis of universal experiences of pain and longing, such as would, for example, be experienced by the baby who screams when his mother puts him down for a nap, turns her back, and walks out of the room. Vocalist Miguel Poveda told an interviewer that, for him, the suffering that can

inspire pathos-laden singing need not be poverty and persecution but could certainly include the recent death of his father.[22] Implicitly, Poveda could draw upon such genuine sadness in singing, transmuting it into artistic expression and thereby lending depth to his rendering of verses that are similarly mournful, though not concerning the specific death of a father. Insofar as everyone has experienced some form of loss in their lives, such sentiments are effectively universal and can be tapped into by singers.

Similarly, another singer, José de la Tomasa, at once refutes the one-must-suffer notion and specifies how he will envision something in his own life in order to inhabit, at a certain level, the sentiment of the text, but specifically in order to use that sentiment in aesthetic expressivity:

When I sing a *siguiriya*, keep in mind that you arrive at a town or city and you have to sing a *siguiriya*, which is a tragic *cante*, when you yourself are not in a tragic situation and you're doing OK financially, and your family is fine. How do you transmit the drama to the public? So you become an actor at that moment. You're a singer but also an actor. What is José doing? Close your eyes and see the faces of your ancestors, my grandfather, great-grandfather, my father and even my children. That's what I do, and I take it out and mold it. If I don't do that the *siguiriya* will sound banal, facile, without feeling.[23]

Yet another vocalist, Alfonso Mogaburo Cid, interviewed by the author, articulated a similar perspective. Cid clarified that he chooses lyrics with which he can to some extent identify, that are not too remote from his personal experience. This process may obviously involve a superficial level of role-playing, but more important is the conjuring of a genuine sentiment that can be transmuted in song. I asked how he could sing the following familiar traditional *copla*, in which its author, Frijones (d. 1917) commemorates himself:

*Me llamo Antonio Frijones
Yo no me caso con la Farotita
pa' no echarme obligaciones.*

My name is Antonio Frijones
and I won't marry La Farotita
so that I won't have any obligations with her.

As Cid explained, it does not matter that his name is not Frijones; the essence of the *copla* is the relationship portrayed. I asked if he could sing another familiar *copla* praising the town of Alosno—"I'm from Alosno, I'm a son of Alosno" (*Soy alosnero*,

soy hijo de Alosno)—when he himself is from Seville. He replied, “Well, I might sing that song if the situation called for it, and then, since I have in fact been to Alosno, I would picture the town in my head, its tree-lined streets, its plazas, and I would see myself as singing to that town.”[24] He continued, “But if I can’t relate to the feeling of the verse at all, then I wouldn’t sing it.” In general, modern singers tend to avoid lyrics that are too remote from their own experience and that would require excessive suspension of disbelief for listeners. Thus, for example, the abundant nineteenth-century *contrabandista* verses about daring smugglers, with their pistols and fast ponies, are seldom heard today.

These accounts of vocalists suggest a particular aesthetic process, with particular sorts of role-playing and genuine expression. The singer may, at a certain level, act a part in envisioning the character or situation depicted in the lyrics, but he or she is not merely acting. José Valencia, depicted in Figure 1, is not *pretending* to be moved. Certainly some singers, some of the time, do feign intense expression, especially, for example, if they have to sing night after night at a *tablaó* (cabaret-like club). But hardcore flamenco audiences are discriminating, and no singer could achieve genuine respect and popularity merely by going through the motions of singing with feeling. At the same time, singing *cante jondo* is not uninhibited method acting in which the singer directly expresses the emotion of the lyric’s persona, without aesthetic distancing. Vocalists in flamenco, as in other genres, put considerable thought, effort, and practice into their art. Effects such as the sobbing-like falsetto breaks (*jipio*) are practiced assiduously rather than being elements of some spontaneous primal scream. Langer (writing of instrumental music), again is quotable: “Oddly enough, the player who projects irrelevant feelings into music, emotional fragments of his own life, is the one who is in danger of exhibiting ‘mere technique,’ because he is not thinking the music entirely.”[25]

The anguished, histrionic flamboyance of *cante jondo* singing in some ways heightens the ambiguity of the relationship between artifice and emotion, as reflected in the ongoing debates about purity and authenticity. Langer’s notion of “ardor for the import conveyed,” though referring to instrumental rather than vocal music, might be a constructive way to understand the nature of the genuine emotion felt and conveyed by a singer like Valencia. But where, then, does the aesthetic distancing occur? At the level of the ardor, or the import? Relevant insight might be found in the writings of Peter Kivy, who, though primarily discussing aesthetic response rather than the creative process,

argues that the listener's response to music is a genuine, real-life emotion rather than some special category of make-believe aesthetic emotion (as argued, for example, by Walton).[26] However, this response, which might even feel like "sadness," is not a "garden-variety" emotion such as sadness, per se, but is a state of being moved by the beauty of the music; it pertains to the art, rather than some real-life situation. Thus, Valencia, when photographed by the author, may have been singing with great passion about the (fictive) death of his mother; his passion and ardor were real rather than feigned, but they were animated by the art rather than an actual event and accordingly generated much aesthetic rapture. Indeed, that item, upon ending, elicited thunderous applause, during which Valencia, dripping with sweat, beamed delightedly and gratefully (rather than whimpering over a deceased mother).[27]

Thus far, this essay has focused on the creative process in expressive singing rather than the listeners' responses. Needless to say, these two phenomena may differ dramatically in both qualitative and quantitative terms. As noted, the listener might either ignore or attend to the text, which in any case is itself generally open and polysemic enough as to accommodate or inspire a wide range of emotional responses or interpretations. Arguably, when a listener, such as Bohórquez, quoted above, insists that a singer's biographical suffering is audible in his art, it may be more likely that such a listener is imagining that he or she hears such suffering; he or she is hearing *as if* the singing were expressing that anguish.[28]

6. Conclusions

In this essay, I have used the case of flamenco and its traditional aesthetic of authenticity to explore questions relating to the aesthetic process involved in song. The ideology of authenticity in flamenco, on its most basic level, asserts that one cannot sing tragic lyrics effectively, and perhaps, one does not even have the right to try, unless one has experienced a requisite degree of genuine, preferably material, suffering and deprivation. On a more abstract level, the ideology presupposes a certain theory of aesthetic expression in song, namely that role-playing, singing *as if* one has suffered, and drawing from some universal layer of experience in order to *imagine* the experience articulated in the lyrics are not sufficient for expressive singing in a genre so socially embedded, hyper-dramatic, and frequently lachrymose as flamenco. As we have seen, some singers, especially elders, do explicitly articulate this belief, while others, by contrast, assert that they can effectively draw on near-universal experiences—whether the death of a relative or the image of

some tree-lined streets—to animate their singing. Insofar as their singing is expressive and they are correctly interpreting their own aesthetic process, their accounts contradict the one-must-suffer argument in its crude form, instead insisting that everyone has suffered to the extent necessary to imagine the more profound sentiment in the lyrics. Further, such accounts suggest that listeners who are only satisfied by the singing of vocalists who have supposedly suffered may be indulging in their own associative fantasies, rather than perceiving any inherent quality in the music.

At the same time, singers are conscious of the limits of their ability to inhabit the artistic persona of the lyrics. Further, in order to sing well, they must of course be able to transmute any real-life emotion into art, with all the aesthetic distancing that such a process entails. If this process remains enigmatic in its way, even less clear is the aesthetic stance of the listener. It is extremely common for listeners in any genre to experience songs as powerfully moving by relating their lyrics to sentiments or experiences in their own emotional lives, whether these involve a lost love, a socio-political sentiment, or even a purely imaginary situation. A strict neo-Kantian formalism would call for an aesthetic response that, like the singer's creative process, would be appropriately disinterested and distanced. Yet, as with representational visual arts, the distinctions between form and cognitive content and between properly aesthetic and non-aesthetic reactions are deeply ambiguous for consumers in addition to artists. They can also be further obscured by ideologies of authenticity that may embody their own implicit and arguably implausible conceptions of the aesthetic process. Attending to the statements of performers and consumers may help illuminate aspects of this dynamic, but the very contradictions voiced by different performers and connoisseurs also parallel the lack of consensus among scholars of aesthetics regarding the nature of aesthetic emotion and meaning.

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Fig. 1. José Valencia (photographs by the author)

Endnotes

[1] Stephen Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

[2] New York: Routledge, 2015.

[3] Suzanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Scribners, 1953); ref. in ch. 10.

[4] Leonard Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: University of

Chicago Press, 1956); ref. in ch. 1.

[5] Langer, ref. on 151.

[6] Joel Rudinow, "Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52 (1994), 127-137. See also: Paul Taylor, "...So Black and Blue: Response to Rudinow," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (1995), 313-316, and Joel Rudinow, "Response to Taylor." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (1995), 316-318.

[7] Notoriously, 1980s rapper Vanilla Ice was humiliated after attempting to establish such credentials by promoting a bogus autobiography. In modern times, the image of authenticity in rap is typically articulated as "realness," as in the opening line of the mega-hit "Fancy," by white, blond rapper Iggy Azalea, who raps "First things first – I'm the realest" in thick "blaccent" (AAVE – Afro-American Vernacular English).

[8] Due to the negative connotations that the word "Gypsy" has acquired, in this article I use it only when deliberately wishing to invoke those stereotypes.

[9] In this sense, flamenco differs markedly from such a genre as jazz.

[10] Much flamenco is festive and upbeat, though the pathos-laden, Gitano-associated *cante jondo* song-types, such as *siguiriyas* and *soleares*, with their invariably tragic lyrics, have a special status in the repertoire.

[11] For example, Manuel Agujetas (1939-2015), in "*Manuel 'Agujetas', el último indio gitano*" (Manuel Agujetas, the last Indian Gitano"), January 28, 2015. Available at: <https://lamentosflamencos.wordpress.com/>; and Chocolate (Antonio Núñez, 1931-2005), in José Martínez Hernández, *Poética del cante jondo: Filosofía y Estética del Flamenco* ("The Poetics of Deep Song: The Philosophy and Aesthetics of Flamenco," Almazura, 2018), ref. on 174.

[12] Manuel Bohórquez, "Las Fatigas del Cantaor" ("The Suffering of the [Flamenco] Singer"), 2020, <https://elcorreoweb.es/opinion/columnas/las-fatigas-del-cantaor-XN6429132>. All translations from Spanish in the article are by the author.

[13] Paco Sánchez Múgica, "Mateo Soleá [interview]: 'Antes tenías que cantar a un señorito por fuerza; hoy no pasa fatigas nadie'" ("In the Old Days You were Forced to Sing for a Patron; Nowadays no one Suffers") *Lavozdelsure.es*, March 3, 2020. Available at: <https://www.lavozdelsur.es/mateo-solea-antes->

tenias-que-cantar-a-un-senorito-porfuerza-hoy-no-pasa-fatigas-nadie/

[14]

<https://www.inoutviajes.com/noticia/1996/entrevistas/flamenco-con-esencia-negra.html>.

[15] Ricardo Molina, *Misterios del arte flamenco* ("Mysteries of the Art of Flamenco," Barcelona: Biblioteca de la Cultura Andaluza [1967] 1985), ref. on 68.

[16] Typical of the disinterest, as it were, in song is the assertion of Walton, "Music is naturally, normally abstract" (Kendall Walton, "What is Abstract about the Art of Music?" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46, 3 [1988], 351-64; ref. on 351). Is song, with its specific lyric content, somehow an abnormal and unnatural art form? (Or just somehow inferior?)

[17] For example, Langer, ref. on 156.

[18] This essay does not concern guitar playing.

[19] If song, in this sense, constitutes some kind of hybrid of music and drama, arguably operating at two levels, comparisons may be made with representational painting—another under-theorized art—which scholars such as Langer have tended to interpret merely as a play of pure two-dimensional forms, regardless of the subject or "content" portrayed. See Langer, Ch. 5. In such cases, as Beardsley has noted, there many be meaningful, though analytically challenging, distinctions between "form" and "content," though these may vary from art to art, and according to the consumer's disposition. (Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Art Criticism* [Harcourt, Brace. 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981], ref. on 302.) The question again arises: At what point does the viewer's engagement with the content (the subject depicted), rather than the form, the design, cease to be properly aesthetic or distanced?

[20] In Manuel Curao, ed., *Los flamencos hablan de sí mismos III* ("Flamenco People Speak for Themselves"; Seville: Universidad Universal de Andalucía, 2009), ref. on 169. Cf. Langer, though referring to an instrumentalist playing a composition: "Although he need not have actually experienced every feeling he conveys, he must be able to *imagine* it, and every idea, whether of physical or psychical things, can be formed only within the context of experience." Ref. on 146.

[21] For example, Martínez Hernández.

[22] Concha Barrigós, “Miguel Poveda [interview]: ‘Hay flamencos que quieren ser rancios’ (“There are Flamenco People Who Want to Sound Authentic”). *La vanguardia*. March 22, 2012. Available at: <https://www.lavanguardia.com/musica/20120322/54275200736/miguel-poveda-flamencos.html>.

[23] Curao, ref. on 170.

[24] Cid clarified, again in response to my question, that out of respect for Gitanos he would not sing the sort of Gitano-pride lyrics that members of that ethnicity often perform.

[25] Curao, ref. on 146.

[26] See Peter Kivy, *Sound Sentiment: An Essay on the Musical Emotions Including the Complete Text of The Corded Shell* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989). See Walton, ref. on 351-64.

[27] It need scarcely be mentioned that even if the ardor felt by the singer is genuine rather than counterfeit, such ardor does not in itself make one a gifted and effective singer. Several other talents are certainly required in transmuting such sentiment into expressive art.

[28] As Taylor says of such notions in relation to the blues: “‘White people can’t play the blues’ can be analyzed as ‘I can’t properly respond to candidate blues performances in which whites are the principal participants’” Ref. on 315. Cf. Beardsley: “I will say that to hear properly certain kinds of music, it may be necessary for a listener whose phenomenal field is easily affected by his beliefs about the lives and loves of composers to push those beliefs out of his focus of attention: if Schubert’s music sounds pathetic to one who sympathizes with his poverty, that is a mistake” (Ref. on 52- 53). And, many listeners “who talk about musical expression are really talking about their own state of mind when they listen to the music” (Ref on 326).

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