



Paco Pena's 'Flamenco Vivo!' is a passionate synthesis of history and technique

By Hung Nguyen, Staff Writer for The Current March 4, 2013
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The St. Louis Classical Guitar Society kicked off their fiftieth anniversary with "Flamenco Vivo!" on Feb. 28 at the Blanche M. Touhill Performing Arts Center. This 31-city North American tour marks the Paco Pena Flamenco Dance Company's first performance in St. Louis in 10 years.

The lead guitarist and troupe leader, internationally-beloved Paco Pena, was awarded the Kennedy Center's Gold Medal Award for Fine Arts in May 2012 by Spanish monarchs Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia.

In "Flamenco Vivo!" emotionally powerful Spanish-language arrangements were soulfully performed by a talented troupe. The personnel included vocalists Jose Angel Carmona and Cristina Pareja, guitarists Pena, Rafael Montilla and Paco Arriaga and percussionist Julio Alcocer. Choreographers Angel Munoz, Charo Espino and Daniela Tugues translated the music into graceful, determined and passionate dance maneuvers.

Flamenco, a traditional Spanish musical performance, consists of three components: singing, dance and guitar. A centuries-old art, Pena's

flamenco interpretations celebrated the style's origins while convincingly arguing for its enduring relevance in contemporary culture.

Although language barriers may have prevented many members of the audience from fully understanding the spectacle, the power and technique of the performance transcended dialect. The vocalists' idiosyncratic presentations transported the audience through a range of potent emotions, from happiness to frustration to sorrow and pain.

"Flamenco Vivo!" was truly a group effort, weaving together several showcases of brilliant musical performance and dance. Although each performer was given their moment in the limelight, it was the troupe's de facto leader, Spanish classical guitar virtuoso Pena, who offered the most jaw-dropping displays of technical ability. It only took a bar or two into each piece before the audience applauded Pena's dizzyingly intricate solos. Within each note, one understood that the music played was not mere aesthetic, but rather a demonstration of technical prowess and experienced showmanship. In the strumming of each chord, there was an evocative communication of experience and personal history. Although Pena's guitar assumed an understandably elevated role in the performance, the impressive choreography was also an integral part of the show. The animated choreographers dramatized the personal narratives behind the pieces, using percussive footwork and lively gestures to communicate the personal and emotional experience that guided their composition.

Though the vibrant personalities of the individual performers provided several unforgettable moments of technical ability, the success of "Flamenco Vivo!" ultimately came from the collective dynamic between them. The show's integration of three diverse fields of performance art — guitar, vocal performance and dance — lent it striking verisimilitude, three-dimensionality and life. The unrelenting emotional intensity of the presentation held the audience entranced in the passion and majesty of this historically rich art form. The organization of the performances granted each member of the group an individual showcase for their talents, adding up to an expansive narrative that wholly encompassed the audience.

The show ended in a festive spirit as the multitalented personnel swapped their positions, with the guitarists dancing and singing and vocalists dancing. As they twirled offstage, Pena taking up the rear, the standing ovations were all but deafening.

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