

“Opening a Window onto Resonance”

Mauricio Sotelo

Mauricio Sotelo (who celebrated his 50th birthday on 2 October), has been very successfully exploring uncharted musical territory with his combination of traditional flamenco song and the sonic universe of modern music – but in this interview he reveals why he does not wish to remain tied to that aesthetic.

Why has flamenco come to play such a large part in your music – how did that happen?

Sotelo: My musical biography begins in Vienna. When I was a young musician and composer still living in Madrid, I rejected everything which had anything to do with any kind of nationalism – that included flamenco, even though I did play the guitar.

But despite my aversion, flamenco always fascinated me, as it does so many people. It is very genuine-sounding music. Although I always enjoyed new music concerts, I sometimes thought, “That says nothing to me. I know the technique, but there is nothing behind that language.”

I was certainly not interested in flamenco the way an ethnomusicologist or musicologist would have been. I was thinking that I, as a musician, could create a kind of radiography, I could examine what was vibrating behind that mask. I began to go my own way.

Later on, Luigi Nono motivated me; he said I had to go back to Spain and adjust my ears to the music of the cathedrals and flamenco groups.

I often talked with him about oral tradition, the magical art of recollecting 15th-century Venice, about Giordano Bruno and the problem of notation in music, the problem of hearing – that was a very important topic to Nono. He also addressed the Hebrew tradition and the tradition of the gypsies in Andalusia – the latter constituted one of the few oral traditions or heritages still living in Europe. It is a question here of the magical art of recollection, which began with the Greeks who were dealing with the problem of notation and writing.

“The rhythmic finesse of the dancers is unbelievable.”

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And how did your attitude toward flamenco change, then?

Sotelo: Artistic recollection and oral tradition are key words for me. I perceived a different world-music Anschauung – an intuition leading me to go beyond the written notes and “go into the music directly.”

But then it took a long time before you were accepted in those circles.

Sotelo: I must say that it was initially very difficult; I was spurned even in places where the great masters and artists would gather – Enrique Morente, Paco de Lucia and Camarón de la Isla. Now I am on the programme of Suma Flamenca, Madrid’s largest flamenco festival; almost everyone accepts me now.

Did it surprise you to advance into that territory?

Sotelo: I would say that I am traversing virgin territory, as it were. My investigations are strongly influenced by the French spectral school; I have used computers for my analyses – AudioSculpt software, for instance – to analyse the voices of elder flamenco singers. The whole thing is a very long process which is difficult to summarise in only a few words – despite all the pleasure it brings – but it is certainly not a superficial approach to a folkloric music; it is a very profound involvement and investigation.

Are there problems with form?

Sotelo: Schönberg already said that the problem with folk music is not with the small forms, but with the large ones. It is fantastically evident in Mahler – an expression of another dimension of thinking, hearing, being. That also happens with Mozart; it is virtually miraculous that he was able to keep such huge constructions as Don Giovanni in his head. I am convinced that he was a composer able to grasp those incredible sonic structures at a single glance. That is intuition, not construction; it is not composed and assembled – it was thanks to his unbelievable, profound compositional intuition that he was able to grasp that huge dimension in a single moment.

That is the most important thing for me. I want to transfer the quality and the expressive power living in a seguidilla and in small flamenco forms onto a larger architecture – that is, to start small and make a sonic cathedral. In terms of the purely technical aspect, the issue of resonance arises for me. Even if we are speaking of expression, I do not wish to directly display what I want to express; I prefer to open a window of possibilities onto that resonance. And that is why my music is modern – I am no subjugated gypsy; I cannot express that I am oppressed or in prison. I do not want to show that I suffer – I want to let all that strength radiate in the resonating sound-box, so that everyone in the auditorium senses it and identifies with something we all experience and which is part of ourselves.

Recently, you even used a flamenco dancer as a kind of instrument.

Sotelo: I decided to incorporate an additional element in my last two works – a percussive element, a percussion instrument having incredible visual strength – and that in the form of a female flamenco dancer. The dancers know that their rhythm is absolutely precise; their rhythmical refinement, precision and strength are unbelievable. I was very circumspect with that element, since the idea that the audience thinks, “Aha, here comes someone from Spain” immediately suggested itself to me. But I must say that it worked, at least at that moment. The texture of my music probably became even livelier and more interesting because of that.

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the two are always in juxtaposition.”*

Mauricio Sotelo

The sonic world with which you confront flamenco is also the result of spectral analysis of old songs. Can you explain that technique?

Sotelo: The actual sonic image we hear is the result of spectral analyses of old flamenco songs and voices, assisted by software from IRCAM, such as AudioSculpt, processed via OpenMusic and, recently, Orchidée, a programme

helpful with instrumentation. You can also imagine it as an x-ray of a sound. I obtain a new sonic world from it; regarding instrumental techniques, I have certainly been greatly influenced by Helmut Lachenmann and Salvatore Sciarrino.

When Arcángel, that phenomenal flamenco singer, sings his part, you write it down after it has been recorded. How do those melody lines occur? Do they exist and you compose something additional, or are they a cooperative effort?

Sotelo: Work with Arcángel begins with a musical construction. That is, we talk about that old tradition – about the Soleá, one of the flamenco forms, for instance. We talk about the old song forms and suddenly we find a certain musical profile together which intrigues us. Sooner or later we arrive at the point where we can say, “Good – let’s record it and work on it. What have we got – what’s growing here?” Then we begin to work microscopically. After that, Arcángel receives a transformed version – but one which has lost none of its flamenco characteristics; on the contrary, we search as if we were hunting through the grass and finding tiny flowers. We think about how we can tear off little, typical portions on which we can work even more deeply. It is like a filtering process; three or four times, we use something I have recorded for it, including the transformed voice. He learns that, we meet again later on – and somewhere along the line a profile has developed, a line like a flamenco costume – but by then, we’re already somewhere else.

What themes does flamenco deal with?

Sotelo: Predominantly death, suffering, love, of course – flamenco always deals with death, but has no fear of it – the two are always in juxtaposition. But there is always eternal hope. It is not heroic; it is utopic-melancholy, bittersweet – light and darkness.

You are heading in a new direction – where is it leading?

Sotelo: I am en route. Some of the upcoming pieces are very remote, more abstract – but flamenco remains in my heart and soul.

Gerard Mortier has commissioned me to write a new opera, *El público*, by Federico García Lorca. It was actually a lost manuscript of an unfinished work. I find it intriguing to observe Lorca’s development. He used a very clear language, a unique “Lorca language” – a poetic landscape he abandoned after his trip to New York.

El público was written around that time; it is incredibly surrealistic, avant-garde and modern, yet it is still Lorca. All the main themes such as gypsies and love have suddenly disappeared, but Lorca’s soul remains – it is Lorca’s

unmistakeable language.

Interview: Wolfgang Schaefler