

Flamenco dance improvisation: an expanded perspective

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English translation, Neil CHARLTON

Abstract

This study explores improvisation within flamenco, taking dance as the central line and approaching it from an expanded perspective.

The objectives focus on examining the different uses of improvisation in flamenco dance, observing the different configurations that have been developed in recent decades.

The methodology used has been based on an empirical approach and participant observation to establish a content analysis based on the collection of bibliographic data and interviews.

Three main types of improvisation related to flamenco dance have been identified: improvisation in, with and from flamenco.

Improvisation in flamenco is built through established structures and rules, with functional objectives and specific results.

Moreover, improvisation with flamenco involves recognising established codes and, also, reshaping them by shifting the limits.

However, improvisation from flamenco expands and blurs the limits with the use of a language that crosses over to other artistic disciplines.

In conclusion, improvisation in flamenco uses predefined limits and structures, while improvising with flamenco allows us to explore within those structures and redefine the margins. Finally, improvising from flamenco applies and expands an additional language that transcends space and aesthetics. In summary, improvisation in flamenco adjusts to the rules, improvisation with flamenco plays with them, and improvisation from flamenco uses them as another influence in a broader context.

Keywords: improvisation, dance, flamenco, limits, margins, structures, LEGO®

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Introduction

This research arises from the need to reflect on improvisation practices in the field of flamenco that have been carried out over the last two decades in order to more precisely analyse the concepts, practices and spaces that specifically connect flamenco dance and improvisation.

Currently, flamenco is defined and practised in various ways (contemporary, traditional, experimental and fusion flamenco, among others) and, similarly, there are different approaches to defining and practising improvisation (such as contact improvisation, instant composition and body expression). Therefore, it is pertinent to explore the different modes of improvisation present in flamenco dance, which can provide a focus for future broader studies from different areas, including pedagogical and creative spheres.

My interest in researching this topic in detail arose during an improvisation seminar held by the dancer Ladina Bucher in Zurich (Switzerland) between 4 and 8 July 2018. I was invited to this event as a speaker and dancer, and I participated in a series of lectures and improvisations. This context of reflection and practice was fundamental to begin to identify and define the different approaches to improvisation in flamenco dance and to grasp its usefulness, as well as its applications in various fields, such as composition, body expression, pedagogy, practical research and artistic creation.

Consequently, the initial objectives focused on examining the different types of improvisation present in flamenco dance by observing the different configurations that have been evolving, as well as the motives and consequences that have impacted both the performing spaces and the choreographic body language and aesthetics of flamenco.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study is based on an empirical approach, in which I use my experience as a subject and object of study in my roles as

a dance, pedagogy, choreography and research professional. It was expanded through participant observation and content analysis based on collecting and analysing bibliographic, videographic and interview data.

Importantly, my research was conducted from practical research perspectives, so over the years I have held improvisation sessions in collaboration with other artists to gain a more complete view of the different approaches that have been developed.

Both participant observation and content analysis were influenced by the frameworks I have developed as a dance professional over the past 15 years. These frameworks include:

- The “Tócame las palmas” activity, where I coordinated improvisations between flamenco artists as part of the artistic programme that I organised in the Flamenco Empírico season, led by the Mercat de les Flors and the Barcelona Taller de Músics between 2009 and 2015. Some of the reflections and debates surrounding it are set out in Carolane Sanchez’s doctoral thesis and in her documentary *Mémoire(s) : les corps flamenco empiriques*.
- “Postablao”, a name that I have used since 2019 in Barcelona for improvisation meetings in altered flamenco *tablao* structures. This aesthetic alteration of the traditional structure was intended to expand the possibilities of combinations, involving analogies with other artistic specialties such as, for example, a film projectionist who played the role of a singer by screening filmed documents or an electronic synthesiser in the role of a guitar. Also allowing the audience to participate in the improvisation as part of the traditional structure.
- “Im Flame”, stage improvisations between flamenco and urban dance artists present in the programme that I curated at the Tanzhaus flamenco festival in Dusseldorf from 2021 to 2023. This space seeks intergenerational and interdisciplinary exchange, thereby expanding the context and mediation between a younger audience and flamenco.
- Improvisation practices as a practical and artistic research tool within the flamenco research laboratory, which I have coordinated since 2017 in the Research and Innovation Department of the Institut del Teatre. The reflections can be found on the blog where the laboratory chronicles its research processes.

It is important to mention the considerable scarcity of bibliographic material related to improvisation in flamenco dance that provides relevant data for this study. However, reference is made to one of the first publications in which the concept of improvisation linked to flamenco dance appears: the chapter “Reading Improvisation in Flamenco and Postmodern Dance” by Dr Michelle Heffner, included in a compilation on dance improvisation: *Taken by Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader* (2003). In this book, Heffner analyses certain aspects such as authenticity, the *duende* and the stereotypes impregnated in both postmodern dance and flamenco. She also delves, as a dancer and researcher, into the similarities and differences in the approach to improvisation in both dance styles.

Improvisation in, with and from flamenco

During the research process, I identified three main ways of improvising related to flamenco that I called *improvisation in flamenco*, *improvisation with flamenco* and *improvisation from flamenco*. Considering the rhythmic, spatial and temporal structures of flamenco, I found it relevant to use two terms to clarify my discourse: limit and margin. The first represents a real or imaginary line that divides two territories, while the second alludes to the edge of a thing. Limit, therefore, could speak to us of division and centrality, while margin refers to the periphery, an extra-limit space that always expands at the edges or beyond them.

In *improvisation in flamenco* I observe that the margins are more restricted because the limits are generally more rigid at a formal and content level, as well as in the uses of time and space. As Heffner notes (2003: 111): “Even in the most spontaneous gathering of dancers who play *palmas* for one another as they trade solos, the codes for improvisation are strictly prescribed.”

The structures proposed by the act of improvising itself, for example, in a *tablao*, have certain objectives. These objectives can be agreed upon verbally between the participants: for example, agreeing on a tone that defines a flamenco *palo*, the clothing for that *palo*, *rematar una letra* or not, ending with or without *zapateado*, the number of sung *letras*, and so on.

Moreover, sometimes, these objectives are recognised or identified through prior trial-error learning. Trial-error is generally understood through external confirmation or denial. For example, when the guitarist does not accompany you at a certain moment in your dance discourse. There is something in your dance that that person has not captured (due to a lack of body code or choreographic gesture that differs from the one recognised in that context), so you accept that it is perhaps not the ideal gesture to share. You try to decide which one is right, perhaps by confirmation from external bodily symbols of approval. An *olé* is usually a confirmation identified as approval.

Other more subtle objectives also appear in improvisation in flamenco: creating a bond of affection and acceptance with whoever accompanies you (singing, guitar) or checking how the audience responds to a gesture that is usually rewarded with applause, *jaleo* or laughter.

All this leads us to observe that improvisation in flamenco can tend to be built and supported by production perspectives: seeking functionality and results.

On the other hand, *improvisation with flamenco* allows us to recognise the limits exerted by the structures and codes of the flamenco language, but also how we intend to relocate the margins and move through them. For example, when improvising with flamenco, the aesthetics of flamenco continue to be used and perceived, to a greater or lesser extent, even if the form or sound (if it is singing and the guitar) is distanced “a few millimetres” from how flamenco is represented according to the collective imaginary (exotic, romantic and related to the local traditions). For example, in an improvisation with flamenco one could use more or less the structure of a *farruca* dance (introduction, call, lyrics, *zapateado*, lyrics, ending) but the movements and

aesthetics of the dancer would be inspired by the portrayal of an animal. The difference then with respect to improvisation in flamenco (which we mentioned earlier), where structure, concept and form go in unison in the same meaning, would be that in *improvisation with flamenco* the structures and concepts would be used, but there would be a slight variation of forms, not movement. We could rely on the comparison that Heffner (2003: 114-115) makes between postmodern improvisation and flamenco improvisation when she says: “Improvisation in flamenco enervates established codes, but rarely changes those codes. While structured improvisations in postmodern dance may be strictly organized, movement invention is often recognized as an important component of improvisation.”

The last category would be *improvisation from flamenco*, which tends to be built by blurring the limits and expanding the margins. It seeks, on the one hand, to maintain languages that cross to other artistic disciplines and, on the other, to vary both forms and structures. However, some traces of flamenco remain because the dance continues to include referential body motifs (*zapatear*, moving the hands, etc.), but these resources are approached in a varied way and with a varied technique. For example: *zapatear* with or without shoes horizontally against the wall while someone rattles a glass and accompanies a live voice that is equalised with an Auto-Tune effect, sometimes emulating the melismata of flamenco singing.

To help summarise, I take the example shared by guitarist Ulrich Gottwald *El Rizo* after his improvisation during the seminar in Zurich mentioned at the beginning. According to Ulrich, one option to understand the concept of improvisation would be to compare it with the pieces of the LEGO® construction game. Although the order of the bricks can be changed, they are still defined as LEGO® bricks. Given this, we could say that the first category, *improvisation in flamenco*, would be built through established structures and norms, with functional objectives and specific results. In the relationship between dance and singing, the guitar maintains internal codes that allow it to move within hierarchical, aesthetic, rhythmic and spatial limits. If we take LEGO® as an example, the pieces would be progressively assembled to build an object with a recognised structure: for example, a castle, a house, or a car.

On the other hand, *improvisation with flamenco* would imply recognising the established codes, but also reshaping them through slight displacements of the limits. This would invite us to explore small deviations from aesthetic, sound and gestural symbols. That is, we would take the LEGO® pieces to build a castle, replacing the battlements of its towers with cars.

In the last category, *improvisation from flamenco*, we would not only use the pieces that LEGO® provides us, but we would also create new pieces during the construction process. This would produce another type of object, comparable in dance to generating new aesthetics, rhythms, sounds and body languages.

Currently, we could point out that *improvisation in flamenco* continues to be practised in spaces such as *tablaos*, theatres or official training schools, where the expectations of both the sender and receiver are met. *Improvisation with flamenco* is practised in other stage and pedagogical contexts

(site-specific, unconventional spaces or private training) where it is about establishing a first bridge with other disciplines. And *improvisation from flamenco* is carried out as an act of inclusion of other knowledge, innovation in formats and hybridisation of forms within Live Art, reshaping new spectators and even reclassifying new spaces or including new definitions of the artistic, just as the Valencian pedagogue Inma Garín Martínez invites us to think in her article “Artes Vivas: definición, polémicas y ejemplos” (Garín, 2018: 2).

Before presenting the conclusions, I must stress that, even having worked in these three modes of improvisation within flamenco, my personal interest as an artist, pedagogue and researcher focuses on *improvising from flamenco*. It allows me to amplify my resources and at the same time share them with other people who have different abilities and thereby manage to identify, question, share and expand our knowledge, with which other meanings of the language and practice of flamenco unfold before me. As guitarist Ulrich explained, I am interested in building new pieces while using existing ones simultaneously, building structures during an improvisation.

On a pedagogical level, for a long time I have dissected flamenco dance until I deciphered it into essential elements. For example, I have come to define that the essence of dancing flamenco would be summarised in stomping with your feet on the ground and moving your hands from the little finger. I have explored the possibilities of the body beyond the references and forms that the flamenco language has given me. For example, I observed that flamenco dance in its traditional format and due to a certain configuration of the space with the musicians, tends to use frontality with respect to the audience, which is why I decided to experiment with how my flamenco body can move and communicate in other directions in the space. I have also practised with the idea of internal rhythm to expand my body relationship with the time signature, and I have observed the constant beat existing in sound spaces. This has allowed me to inhabit the silence and thereby expand the not normally uninhabited spaces of flamenco.

All these reflections resulting from my research over these years are set out in pedagogical material that has been collected in the book *El Método Flamenco Empírico*, edited by the journalist Sara Esteller and included in the “Materials pedagògics” collection of the Institut del Teatre. In the method there are eight lines that transversally articulate my practice: aesthetic experience, corporality, the fantastic five, beat-rhythm-time signature, states, *zapateado*, improvisation, and composition.

I define the “improvisation” section in this way: “I propose improvisation from three approaches: the one that pedagogically addresses a resignification of the flamenco gesture through spontaneity and abstraction; one that proposes new relationships of bodies with physical spaces, sound spaces and silence; and one that has an artistic impact through the hybridisation between artistic disciplines.” Therefore, when I improvise from flamenco I seek to use the language of flamenco as another language, as another reference within my artistic practices and interests.

This definition also speaks to how my margins are currently moving and expanding in broad directions, at which point I am fully aware of my

perceptions, allowing me to expand my abilities. For example, within an improvisation I can use the flamenco *palo* of the *soleá* as a body state within my danced discourse. At the same time, I allow myself to use a type of corporality, a use of space or the relationship with the sound that I identify within me as *soleá*. I do not need to rely only on its musical structure (lyrics, time signature, etc.) or on a bodily structure (*marcajes*, *escobillas*, etc.).

When one state or another appears during an improvisation, I accept what happens, I prepare to continue listening and responding to what is being proposed from the other bodies present (dance, music or other arts). Without the demand that the flamenco vocabulary itself can exert on me. This practice has helped me, for example, to make my relationship with the *zapateado* increasingly smoother. I do not perform *escobillas de zapateado*, I generate sounds.

I must clarify that currently, when I improvise from flamenco, I replace the word *structure* with the word *composition* in my vocabulary. On this subject, Steve Paxton says: “If you admit there’s such a thing as compositional improvisation or improvisational composition then you’ve opened the door to making choices; making individual choices within a situation” (Paxton, 2018).

Continuous study and practice have allowed me to have an optimal relationship with the ingredients that make up flamenco, as well as with those that apparently are not part of it or are not very representative. For example, improvising with other types of music, dancing extremely slowly or using laughter as a rhythmic element. This attitude has progressively opened me up to an understanding of artistic acts that are far from being evaluated through binary concepts, those that divide things into only two options: being one thing or another. In short, I have moved further and further away from the debate about whether something is flamenco or not. I understand flamenco beyond the formal, gestural, sound and conceptual limits. It is in the movement of its margins where I find the spaces for improvisation.

In conclusion, we could say that *improvisation in flamenco* uses stricter limits and structures, while *improvisation with flamenco* allows us to explore within those structures and redefine the margins. Finally, *improvisation from flamenco* applies and expands an additional language that transcends space and aesthetics. In summary, improvisation in flamenco adjusts to the rules, improvisation with flamenco plays with them, and improvisation from flamenco uses them as another influence in a broader context.



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