

Scarlatti and the Spanish Dance



Inesita is a Spanish dance artist who has performed around the world and throughout the country. Her discovery of the connection between Scarlatti and the Spanish dance has led her to choreograph a program of traditional Spanish dances to the sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti. She has recently started taking harpsichord lessons in order to gain a fuller understanding of the instrument that Scarlatti composed on. Inesita discusses the influence Spanish dance has had on the Scarlatti sonatas in our interview.

Q. Tell us about yourself.

A. I was born in New York City and grew up in a musical family. My mother as a pianist and my father was a violinist, composer and conductor. I was in my early teens when we finally settled in Los Angeles and at age fourteen, I began my Spanish dance studies. I was drawn to the Spanish dance because of its elegance and rhythmic complexity. Studies took me to Mexico and to Spain where I learned flamenco and all aspects of Spanish dance. I have performed in London, Paris, New York, Mexico City, Valletta, Malta, and in communities and colleges from coast to coast. In addition to solo performances, I give lectures and workshops.

Q. How did you discover a connection between Scarlatti sonatas and the Spanish dance?

A. My husband and I began analyzing the structure and forms of flamenco dance for presentation in my lectures. In the course of our research, we read the biography of Domenico Scarlatti by Ralph Kirkpatrick. We learned that Scarlatti spent twenty-five years in Spain as composer and teacher to the Queen. Four of those years were spent in Sevilla, a province of Andalucia, the cradle of flamenco. Scarlatti was greatly influenced by the Spanish guitar and the flamenco rhythms, songs and dances. He composed 555 sonatas for the Court that reflect the entire gamut of the Spanish idiom.

Q. How did you go about choreographing your dances to Scarlatti sonatas?

A. Prior to this time I had limited knowledge of Scarlatti and had heard only a few of his sonatas. I wanted to evaluate for myself how his music was influenced by the Spanish idiom so I read Kirkpatrick's book several times and immersed myself in listening to the Scarlatti sonata recordings. I heard flamenco patterns that are inherent in his music. Initially, I found four sonatas that I knew I could dance to. The first was Sonata K. 380 set to the Bolero. When I heard this sonata I was able to identify the elements in the piece that fit with the elements in the Bolero. The dance patterns fit beautifully with the phrasing of the sonata so that the dance made itself by using this music. Sonata K. 105 fits perfectly with the Jota. Scarlatti created the atmosphere of the Jota with his rhythms and chords but not the melody. He was an original thinker and would not copy a flamenco melody.

Q. Are your dances to Scarlatti sonatas flamenco dances?

A. No. Flamenco is passed down from generation to generation and is never written down. It is accompanied by guitar or singer and the music is set in the Phrygian mode with definite rhythmic patterns. Castanets and footwork may provide another voice to the musical line. Flamenco artists internalize the rhythms, chords and songs and the interaction between the guitarist, singer and dancer has parallels to jazz but is more sophisticated.

The dancer is conductor and the guitarist must follow the percussive lead put down by the dancer's heel patterns.

Q. How would you describe your dances?

A. My dances are Spanish dances influenced by the flamenco rhythms and phrases that I hear in the Scarlatti sonatas. The sonatas are played on the harpsichord or piano as I dance the same flamenco pattern of steps I would dance with guitar. The fact that the sonatas are written form and are played on the harpsichord or piano make them distinct from flamenco. Scarlatti's sonatas are impressionistic and so are my dances.

Q. You are learning to play the harpsichord which is unusual for a Spanish dancer. Why?

A. I come from a musical family and I studied the piano for ten years when I was growing up. It seemed natural for me to take up the harpsichord in view of its connection to Scarlatti's life in Spain and my own musical background. Dancing to the Scarlatti sonatas has made me want to get close to the instrument that Scarlatti composed on.

Q. What is your greatest challenge on the harpsichord?

A. Learning the ornamentation is a challenge; whether to start from above or below the main note and how many times to play the notes in the ornament. I'm very good at trills because I'm a castanet player and I have lots of facility in my fingers.

Q. What is most rewarding to you?

A. I find it very rewarding to work with my teacher, William Neil Roberts, who has helped me understand all aspects of the harpsichord; technical problems, musical values and history of the Baroque period, including the instruments, composers and style. I'm learning the sonatas that I've danced to and I find the musical structure interesting and the rhythms very sensual and intoxicating. I'm playing Sonata K. 492 and Neil told me, "Inesita, I don't have to teach you how to play Scarlatti." That is very satisfying. I'm learning lots of new repertoire, including the works of Bach, Rameau, and Couperin. Neil compares the harpsichord to a water color and the piano to an oil painting. You can say that I've done oil painting so now I'm enjoying water color.

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