

T **SCHOOL & FAMILY**

SYNCOATED TRADITION

PACO AND CELIA FONTA BRING VIBRANT FLAMENCO HERITAGE TO LIFE AT SCHOOLS

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Though flamenco is one of the most iconic elements of Spanish culture, its origins are somewhat mysterious. Most of what is known comes from oral histories, passed down from generation to generation, much like the art form itself. Scholars and practitioners agree that flamenco dance and music grew out of the influences of Indian, Moorish and Jewish cultures.

Many centuries ago, these populations migrated to southern Spain and settled in the Andalusia region. These newcomers were generally regarded as outcasts and suffered perpetual persecution. Though flamenco culture still reflects their struggle, infused throughout is a resilient spirit of pride and hope.

As part of the Florida Folklife Folk Artist Residency Program, nationally recognized flamenco artists Paco and Celia Fonta shared some of that history and basic techniques with 350 Florida State University School students. Though the guitar is commonly associated with flamenco, Celia said the genre is inherently percussive, with castanets, hand clapping and footwork all used to accentuate the rhythms.

"We accompany flamenco songs and dances with palmas, or hand clapping," she said. "There are two types: We have sordas, which means muffled, and there's also loud hand clapping, or fuertes." She added that "the third, and maybe the most important, part of the percussion element is our zapateado, or footwork. I have special shoes with a wood heel, and it actually has nails in the bottom of it. My feet are my instrument."

During the presentation, the students learned about the geographic context for the flamenco songs and dances they were experiencing. From Seville to Cádiz, Cordoba to Huelva, the audience was virtually transported to Spain. Third-grader Jordyn Adams found this particularly appealing. "I go to the cafeteria and, boom, I can watch somebody from a different place." Fifth-grader Ethan Coats agreed and added, "I really want to go to Spain. This helped me learn a little bit more and made me want to go even more. I like that there's so many musicians in the world and you can listen to all kinds of music."

Flamenco music is notoriously challenging, and Paco explained the impressive and intricate strumming technique for flamenco guitar, called rasgueado. He demonstrated the finger flicks for the students, each finger working independently, allowing for extremely fast and complex rhythms. Paco was born in Jaen, Spain, where he learned flamenco singing and guitar from traditional musicians.

He and Celia met while she was studying Spanish abroad in Barcelona, a pursuit she initiated to further her practice of flamenco guitar. Celia recalled, "I started playing at age 12. My guitar teacher taught me a little bit of flamenco, and that was it. I knew that's what I wanted to play." Growing up in Chicago, there weren't many opportunities to explore flamenco, so Celia "decided to become a Spanish major in college, to learn Spanish, to go to Spain, to continue studying flamenco guitar."

While there, she also learned flamenco dance and began working with Paco. They later married and moved to Miami, and they still perform together, sharing their passion for flamenco at schools and senior centers.

"In order to really do flamenco, you have to love it because it takes a long time and a lot of frustration," Paco cautioned. "You want to play something and it will not come out right away. But if you really like it, there's nothing that will impede it." That's the overarching message they hope to spread through their presentations to students.

"It's a way of giving the knowledge that I got over the years to the younger generation," Paco said. Celia added: "Flamenco, in particular, is the kind of thing that you learn passing down from generation to generation, and that's the only reason it's still living and still growing. Maybe people have never seen it or heard it before, so that's knowledge that they're gaining about the scope of the possibilities of music out there. You can be from anywhere in the world and appreciate it."

That's music to the ears of Amanda Harde-man, state folklorist with the Florida Folklife Program, a component of the Florida Department of State's Division of Historical Resources. She works to coordinate learning ex-

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periences like this in our area and across the state. “As a folklorist I care about the sheer diversity of cultural traditions that you can find in a place like Florida. This is a cultural melting pot.” Committed to shining a light on communities that are often overlooked, Hardeman creates education and artist residency programs designed to promote Florida’s diversity.

As part of flamenco’s continuing evolution, Florida, with its strong ties to Spanish culture, has become a hot spot for artists seeking to keep the art form alive. Hardeman believes that by bringing “traditional arts programs into schools, it shows that there are infinite possibilities and methods of expression. Providing these opportunities allows students to interact with and learn from those tradition bearers.”

Amanda Karioth Thompson is the



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Paco and Celia Fonta perform for Florida State University School students.



education and exhibitions director for the Council on Culture & Arts, the capital area’s umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).