

## In search of Duende:

## Penny Waterhouse



I sing because I am. At that moment of stillness, before the music starts, I am waiting for something to arrive. Something transformative. To take me, other musicians and the audience to another place. Something that is of me, and not me. What am I waiting for? Duende or tener duende ("having duende") loosely means having soul, a heightened state of emotion, expression and authenticity, often connected with flamenco.

The artistic and especially musical term was derived from the duende, a fairy or goblin-like creature in Spanish mythology. The Spanish poet and writer, Lorca, talked in detail about Duende. There is something here, I thought.

The characteristics of Duende speak to the heart of the "something" I was aware of, lurking in the shadows. Something elusive that keeps slipping out of sight but which on occasion appears.

*'The duende is not in the throat; the duende  
climbs up inside you, from the soles of the feet'*

Duende is dark. Its qualities consist of conflict, "the other", capriciousness and death. It is enriched by diaspora and hardship. It speaks to the human conditions of authentic joy and sorrow. It is the well from which creativity and insight is drawn.

*“Duende doesn’t show up unless there is a possibility of death –  
it loves the fringe, the wound, places where shapes melt into desire.*

*Its presence in the blood smarts like ground glass.”*

The duende loves the rim of the wound. It draws near places where forms fuse together into a yearning. In the healing of that wound, which never closes, lie the strange, invented qualities of human expression. Duende lives in blue notes, in the break in a singer's voice. A point of possible extinction. It is what gives you chills, makes you smile or cry as a bodily reaction to an artistic performance that is particularly expressive.

It is not a question of ability. Lorca writes: "The duende, then, is a force not a labour. It is a struggle, not a thought. The true fight is with the duende. No emotion is possible unless the duende comes. There are neither maps nor exercises to help us find the duende. One must awaken the duende in the remotest mansions of the blood. Every artist climbs each step in the tower of their perfection by fighting their duende. A mysterious power which everyone senses and no philosopher explains."

According to Christopher Maurer, editor of "In Search of Duende", at least four elements can be isolated in Lorca's vision of duende: irrationality, earthiness, a heightened awareness of death, and a dash of the diabolical. The duende shows the limits of intelligence, reminding us that ants can eat us or that a great arsenic lobster could fall suddenly on our heads. The duende is seen by Lorca as an alternative to style, to mere virtuosity. Not that the artist simply surrenders to the duende; they have to battle it skillfully, in "hand-to-hand combat". With idea, sound, or gesture, the duende enjoys fighting the creator on the very rim of the well.

Duende is shape-shifting. The duende's arrival always means a radical change in forms. It brings to old planes feelings of freshness, with the quality of something newly created. A sense of first-timeness which can never be repeated, any more than do the forms of the sea during a squall. The trouble with duende is that it is too dark, too serious to be the star of the show. I am not only waiting to sing the profound and the harrowing. I am waiting for Joy and celebration. To express brightness which does not depend on sorrow. To find the sparkle that comes from a naughty fairy. To value ephemera as well as substance.

Perhaps I am simply waiting for my brain to fire up its oxytocin wash. The chemical which is pumped out when humans listen to and make music. The chemical which assists birth and social bonding, mends wounds, reduces fear and increases libido and trust.

A cocktail of Duende and Oxytocin is a heady mixture. But the other trouble with Duende is its potential for elitism and exclusivity: what about us mere mortals who, despite our aspirations, fail to meet this illustrious visitor. Is our music and expression of less value?

Perhaps I'll lower my sights and simply hope to find the work-a-day joy and communion of making music with others.