

How I learned to dance **FROM YOUTUBE**

Neil Bennion prepared for Seville's April Fair
with the aid of the internet and a blue biro

I'd left it far too late to learn from a group class. Seville's April Fair, where people dress up in traditional finery and dance Sevillanas, was already upon us. That's why I decided to turn to the internet for help. But is it really possible to learn to dance to any kind of standard from YouTube?

Sevillanas is a flamenco-like dance performed to folk music of the same name. It's done in a line and features set moves executed in a prescribed order, making it a very different proposition to many other partner dances.

Having already had one abortive attempt at learning it in a group class, I'm now trying again in my own personal classroom, aka my flat.

Whilst the man on the screen is undoubtedly engaged in some very accomplished dancing, there are no instructions, nor even a partner – just him on his own.

At first I try to copy him in real time, but this fails because I simply can't keep up. Also because, short of waltzing around with it in my hands, I can't actually dance and watch at the same time.



Neil Bennion dances the Sevillanas with Paqui Fiestas

I switch to a more analytical approach – breaking the dance down into manageable chunks, and scribbling them down in sequence using my own invented lexicon of terms. I repeat the individual moves again and again, drumming them into muscle memory.

The problems are manifold: trying to work out which limb is doing what is tough, especially with the reduced sense of depth. And then you've got the whole game of "guess what your partner is doing at this point". At the same time, I'm trying to remember to look at the pair of eyes that I've drawn in blue biro and pinned to the wall. I just hope all this will be worth it.

Seville's April Fair is a sight to behold. There's a sense of pomp about the occasion, with the men attired in hats and short jackets, and the women in flamboyant flamenco dresses. Meanwhile, horse-drawn carriages clatter up and down the avenues in a rich display of elegance.

The streets are lined with casetas – tent-like structures that are often luxuriously decorated – and it's inside these that the real fun happens. Like dancing Sevillanas. ▶



Scenes from
Seville's April Fair

I watch the action as it unfolds on the stage to the strum of live guitar and percussion: a captivating splash of colour and frills accompanied by artful flourishes from the hands and wrists.

My friends are bemused when I tell them how I've learned, especially when I pluck the scrawled notes from my back pocket. "¿Vas a bailar así?" one of them jokes, holding them up in front of her. Are you going to dance like this?

I might as well – my first attempt with a partner is terrible. I just can't seem to fit what I've learned to the music. Things improve with the next couple of dances, but it's still all very mechanical.

I'm encouraged by the fact that there are so few other men dancing, though – many women end up partnering each other. And, of the men that do dance, many only seem to know the most basic rudiments.

As I go on I actually feel like I'm getting worse, my frail memory of the moves trodden underfoot as I try to incorporate the new things I'm being taught. My friends, however, disagree: I'm now more in tune with the rhythm and the feel of the dance; things I would have struggled to pick up from a video alone.

Others are impressed too: As word spreads, friends of friends join us wanting to see my scribblings, kindly ignoring my shortcomings at the actual dance.

Once I'm really in the swing of it there's simply no going back. The wooden stage reverberates with zapateos (flamenco-like foot-taps), the air buzzes with castanets and the scent of sherry hangs thick.

I'm hooked on the atmosphere alone, and end up dancing to the early hours, and even come back for all the remaining nights of the fair, unable to get enough of a really good thing.

Learning to dance from a YouTube video didn't make me an expert, and there were plenty of things I couldn't have grasped without physically getting out there. But it was a whole lot of fun, and gave me an entry point to a cultural experience that'll be hard to forget. ●

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