orfeo MAGAZINE

N°II

England Special

Paul Fischer
Christopher Dean
Kevin Aram
Gary Southwell
Michael Gee
David Rodgers

N° 11 - Spring 2018
English Edition

Founder and Publisher: Alberto Martinez
Art Director: Hervé Ollitraut-Bernard
Publishing assistant: Clémentine Jouffroy
French-English translation: Meegan Davis
French-Spanish translation: Maria Smith-Parmegiani

Site internet: www.orfeomagazine.fr

Contact: orfeo@orfeomagazine.fr

From the Editor

orfeo MAGAZINE N°11

Few now remember that the guitar enjoyed massive popularity in England in Shakespeare's day and that it was played everywhere from the royal court to common taverns.

Most guitars came from France or Italy at the time, while local instrument makers specialised predominantly in lutes and pianos. The only notable exception was Panormo, in the nineteenth century.

It was the meeting of guitarist Julian Bream with luthier David Rubio that ultimately rekindled the flame of guitar making in England.

When visiting England, I had to make some painful choices and limit my interviews to just five luthiers. But there are so many more that I would love to call upon! I hope that Ambridge, Barton, Requena and their peers will all forgive me: I would dearly love to come back to meet with you and chat about our beloved instrument.

Alberto Martinez

The guitar in England

One of the earliest known "English guittars", made in 1757 by Robert Burns.

Despite the popularity of the five-course guitar in seventeenth-century Europe, there are no known English guitars from that period: the guitars and the masters all came from France or Italy. Luthiers in England were building "English guittars", a kind of cittern, a metal-strung instrument with moveable bridge, comprising a short neck connected to a pear-shaped body with a flat back. The cittern was very much in vogue in England from the sixteenth to eighteenth century.

The cittern was easier to play and carry than the lute; smaller and less fragile

English cittern made by Thompsons in London, circa 1780.

The cittern was a popular instrument, played across all social classes, much as is the guitar of today. In contrast to the lute, its flat-backed construction was simple and less costly. It was also smaller, less fragile and easier to transport and play.

It is not until the eighteenth century that a few true guitars built by John Preston in London appear.

The Spanish War of Independence (1808-1814), in which the English and the Spanish fought side-by-side to repel Napoleon's forces, drew the two countries closer together and completely changed England's image of Spain. Writers like Washington Irving (1783-1859) with his *Tales of the Alhambra,* and the publication of the work by architect Owen Jones (*The Grammar of Ornament*) kindled a sort of fascination for Andalusia among the English public.

© Bompton's (2).

In the early nineteenth century the six-stringed guitar made its debut in England. The concerts and classes of Fernando Sor, who lived in London between 1815 and 1823, and the publication of "The Giulianiad" guitar magazine did much to accelerate the instrument's spread.
The best-known "Spanish guitar" luthier of this period was undoubtedly Louis Panormo (1784–1862). Born in Paris, the son of an Italian luthier from Sicily, he settled in London in 1819 and produced superb six-string guitars, the labels of which declare him "The only Maker of Guitars in the Spanish Style".
In truth, Panormo built his guitars using the Spanish method but he also borrowed from other schools: tops with seven-strut fan bracing, strings held in place with bridge pins, slightly curved ebony fretboard and head attached with a V-joint. He was one of the first to varnish the guitar soundboard and use modern machine heads.
By the end of the nineteenth century the English were discovering Spanish composers: Manuel de Falla, Enrique Granados, Pablo Sarasate and Isaac Albéniz. In an ironic twist of fate, it was a French composer's opera – George Bizet's crowd-pulling *Carmen* – that helped boost the appeal of Spanish music in England.
In the twentieth century, Segovia's concerts further heightened the appetite for contemporary classical guitar in England, but most instruments, trifling local production notwithstanding, were still imported from Spain.
But it was the pairing of Julian Bream and David Rubio that heralded the true take-off of guitar manufacture in England. Their connection began in New York in the sixties and led to the construc-

Made by Panormo in 1828, this guitar belonged to Spanish guitarist Trinidad Huerta.

Louis Panormo, in London, made the best guitars of his day

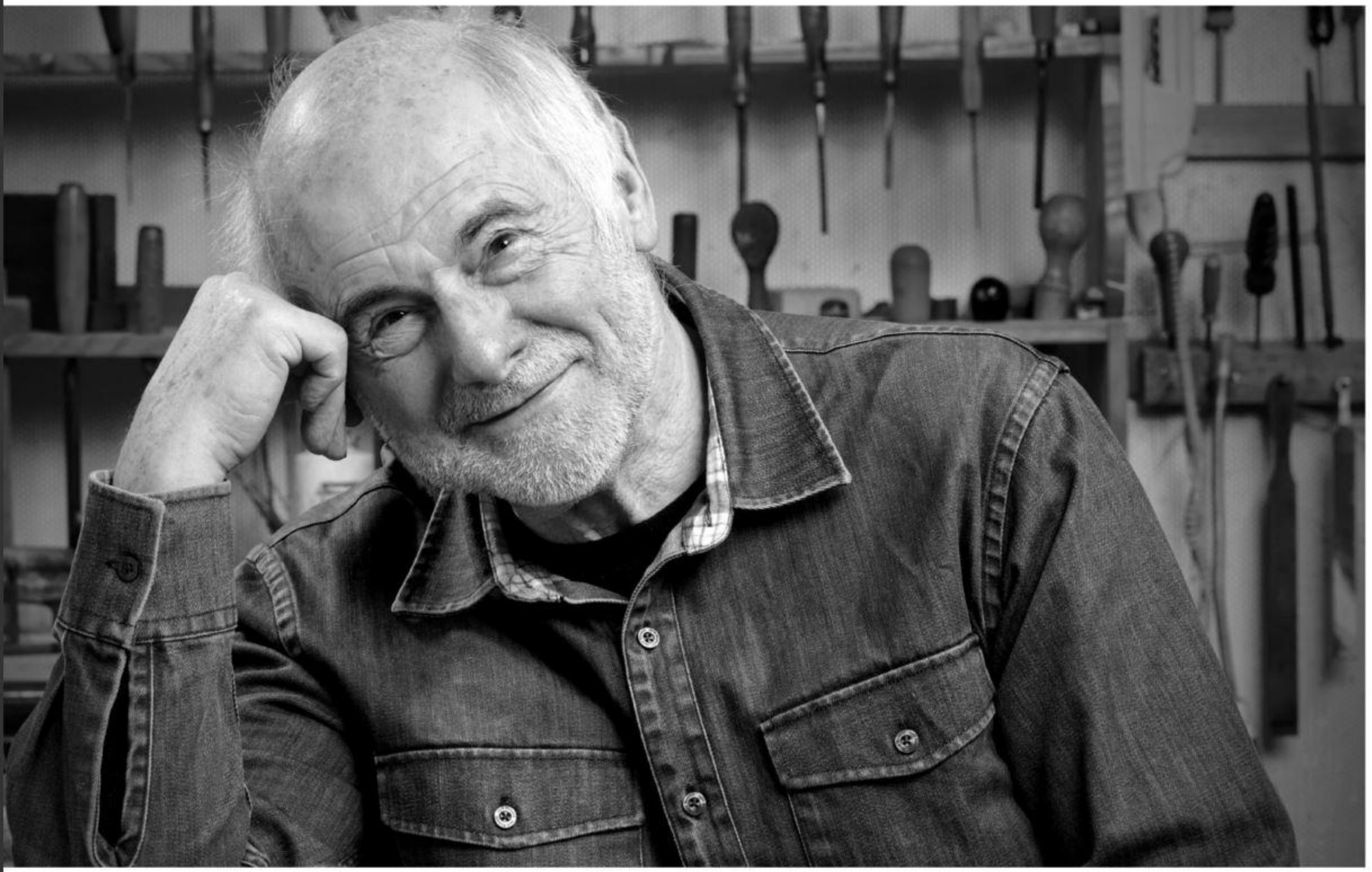
Julian Bream played on
Rubio's guitars for ten years

**David Rubio,
New York 1966.**

tion of two guitars on which Bream would play for ten years or so (*) and Rubio's return to England in 1967. Rubio initially set up his studio on Bream's estate in Semley before later settling in Duns Tew, near Oxford. As demand ballooned, Rubio called upon another luthier, a certain Paul Fischer…

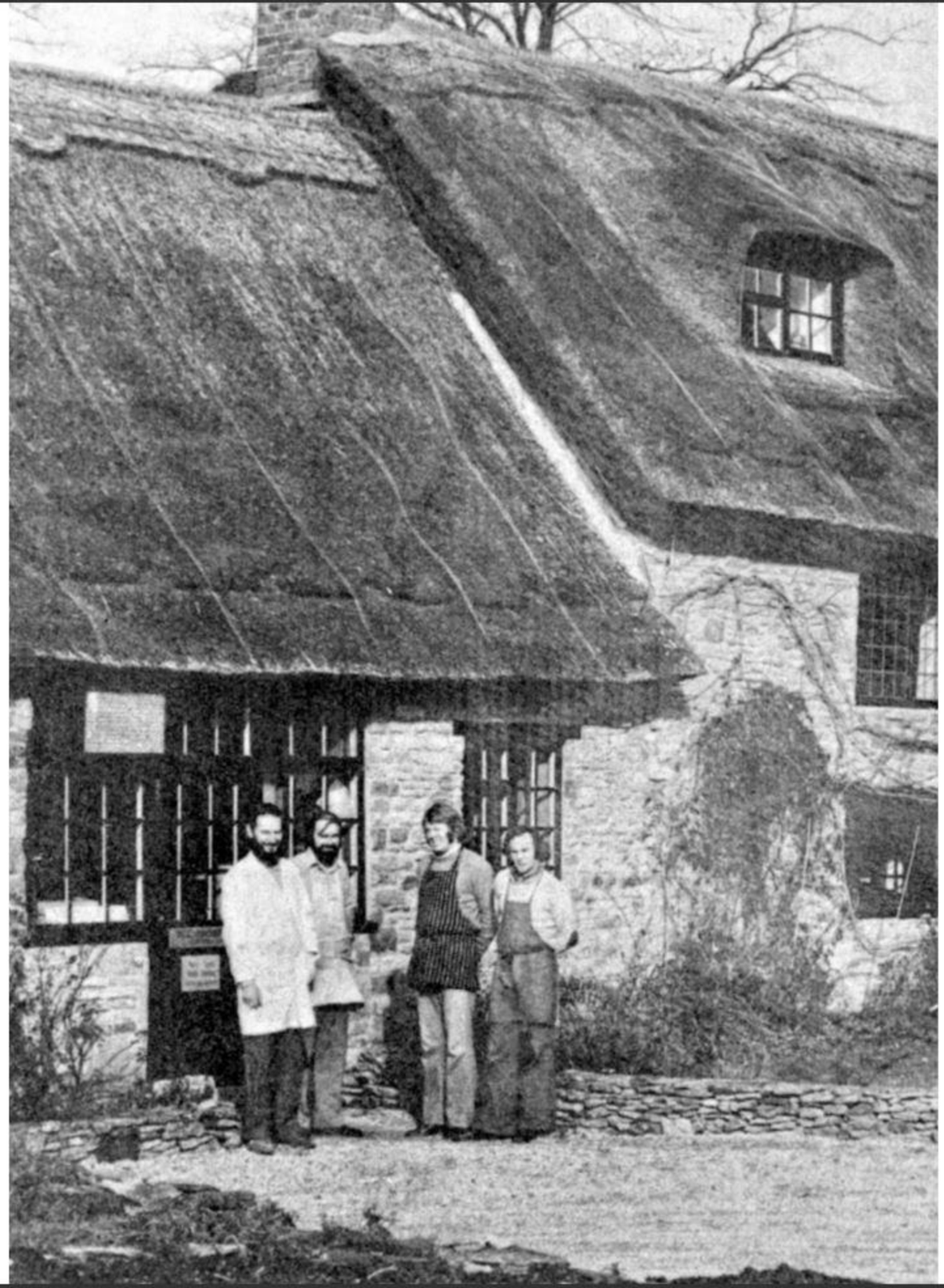
(*) Albums recorded by Julian Bream using David Rubio's guitars: 1966 - 20th Century Guitar, RCA LSC2964: 1965 Rubio guitar. 1968 - Julian Bream and Friends, *RCA LSC3027: 1966 Rubio guitar. 1968 -* Classic Guitar, *RCA LSC3070: 1966 Rubio guitar.*

Paul Fischer, David Rubio's successor



Paul Fischer began his career making harpsichords. He joined David Rubio in 1969, working as Rubio's chief instrument maker for six years before setting up his own workshop in 1975. During his sixty years of exploring and refining his craft as a luthier, he has made 1,200 instruments and helped firmly establish the English school of guitar making.

David Rubio's house in Duns Tew, as it stands today.



"You really can't talk about an English tradition of guitar making before Rubio."

What can you tell us about guitar making in England before David Rubio?

Paul Fischer – The only luthier from eighteenth-century England that I remember is John Preston… We've never been famous for guitar making. Luthiers used to make the so-called "English guittar", a kind of cittern with metallic strings – very trendy in those days – but it actually was a completely different instrument.

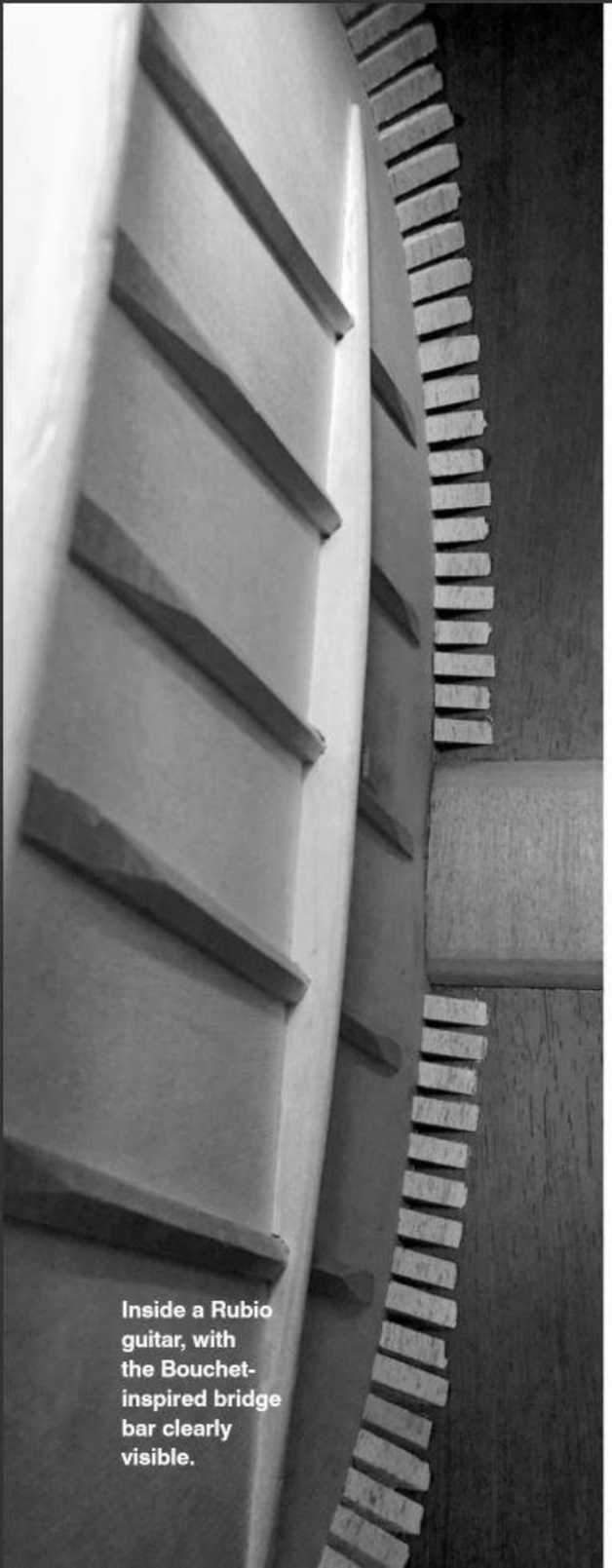
There was hardly any guitar making in the nineteenth century. The first major luthier in England was Panormo, and he certainly made the best guitars of that period. But Panormo was Italian, anyway!

In the twentieth century, before Rubio, there were three or four guitar makers but they built very mediocre guitars. In a sense, you really can't talk about an English tradition of guitar making before Rubio, because there was nothing of real importance.

Rubio learned to build guitars mainly with Esteso's nephews (the Conde brothers) in Madrid. He was a flamenco player and so he travelled a lot in Spain, visiting other luthiers in Granada and Seville, observing how guitars were made. He had a kind of photographic memory.

He started making guitars in 1963 in New York. There, he met Julian Bream and built a couple of guitars for him. When he came back to England, he initially had his workshop on Julian Bream's estate, in Semley, and later moved to Duns Tew, near Oxford.

Left, Rubio at work; right, outside the workshop with Paul Fischer and two employees.



Inside a Rubio guitar, with the Bouchet-inspired bridge bar clearly visible.

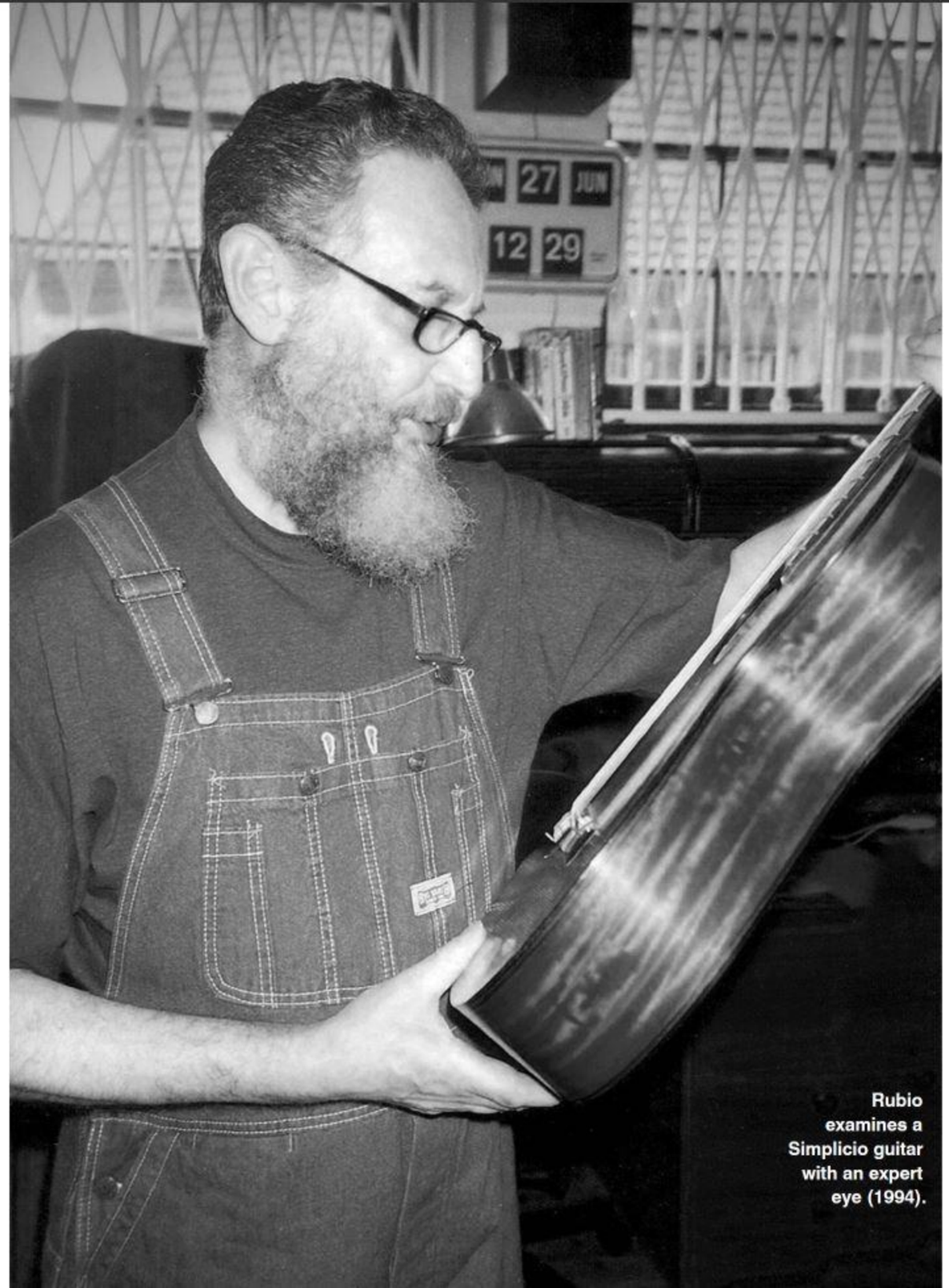
"Rubio's influence in England was tremendous; he is the starting point of the English school of guitar making."

What Rubio did was to craft very high-end guitars right from the start. The guitars made in New York for Julian Bream gave him the status of a master guitar maker. Success followed, almost overnight. Thanks to Julian Bream, Rubio had leading players coming from all over the world to buy his instruments.

What was Rubio's construction method?

P. F. – His major influence came from the Spanish guitar makers, particularly Domingo Esteso and Santos Hernández. Later, he incorporated some of Robert Bouchet's ideas, around the time when Julian Bream was playing with a Bouchet guitar. Rubio used a modified "nodal bar" to get a stiffer top, a clearer sound and greater sustain. Because of his connection with Bream, whose preferences influenced the characteristics of his instruments, he created instruments that were clearly distinct from Spanish school guitars. He was beginning to move in a direction where most luthiers ended up heading by the late twentieth century: towards stiffer soundboards.

Rubio's influence in England was tremendous; he is the starting point of the English school of guitar making. Before Rubio, most players would simply go to Spain to buy a guitar – Hauser instruments were the exception.



Rubio examines a Simplicio guitar with an expert eye (1994).

Fischer's last construction, guitar No.1,200, made of maple and displaying a blend of styles.

"I made my last guitar in August 2016, which I will keep for my grandchildren."

When did you meet Rubio?

P. F. – I began building musical instruments in 1956, with the harpsichord maker Robert Goble, and I joined Rubio in 1969, when he was in Duns Tew. I worked with him for six years as chief instrument maker; the guitars had the Rubio label but they were stamped with my initials.

In 1975 I established my own studio, and began crafting instruments that were wholly mine, and not clones of Rubio's. I also made copies of instruments from Simplicio, Panormo and Stradivari, the one in the Oxford Museum and the one in Paris. I loved them. Unlike most baroque guitars – which were more beautiful objects than instruments – the Stradivari guitars were serious musical instruments.

Are you worried with the new CITES regulations?

P. F. – Well, I need not be, because I am retired! I made my last guitar in August 2016, which I still have and which I will keep for my grandchildren.

Guitars made of non-tropical woods for the 1985 experiment.

In 1985, I built eight guitars, all identical, with the same tops and bracings, but with different woods for the backs and sides. Only one was built with Brazilian rosewood. I held a presentation in London where John Mills played these instruments and the audience was asked to judge the results in a blind test. No one could pick out the Brazilian instrument from the others! It was a very serious experiment but it was unsuccessful. It was in 1992 that Brazilian rosewood was banned by CITES, so that work was well ahead of the game. Guitarists, generally, are quite conservative; they only want to buy what they know. It's a bit strange because musicians should be creative people, always looking for something fresh, something better. They are artists; so why be so conservative?

Detail of a typical Fischer rosette.

The Cotswolds in winter. Duns Tew is located in this area, famous for its picturesque villages.

Christopher Dean, custodian of tradition

Christopher Dean learned his craft at the *London College of Furniture* and perfected his technique working for three years with Paul Fischer. Today he carries the great Spanish guitar tradition forward through his two models: “Concert” and “Kingham”.

Christopher Dean putting the first strings on a freshly-finished Kingham.

This page and opposite, the concert model.

When did you build your first guitar?

Christopher Dean – I became fascinated with the guitar in my teens, when I learned to play the instrument. In 1975 or 1976, I received the Irving Sloane book about guitar making as a Christmas present and a year or so later, I built my first guitar. I just loved the process.

Then, from 1979 to 1981, I studied at the *London College of Furniture*, where they had a department completely devoted to musical instruments. (Gary Southwell came one year after me and Michael Gee had already finished.)

From 1982 to 1985 I worked with Paul Fischer and then I set up my own workshop. Paul was a very good teacher. After three months of showing me what to do, he trusted me and let me make the guitars. I'm very grateful to him; his way of working was pure common sense.

The guitars that I built for him were branded *Fischer lutherie* with a special label, and only the last guitars had my initials.

Who inspires you the most?

C. D. – Obviously, I had quite some influence from Paul, because I was building his guitars for three years.

Daniel Friederich was another important influence: for a long time I tried to understand his very

Examples of Dean's rosettes.

Rosette from the Santos Hernandez model.

Christopher Dean gets the "solera" ready to start a new guitar.

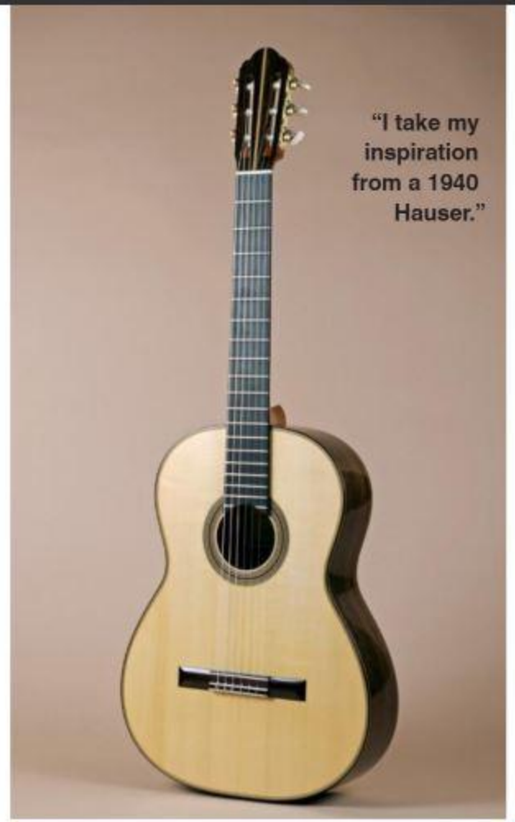
scientific way of working. In my mind, in my head, in my heart, I had a sound that I wanted to produce and Friederich guitars offered everything that I wanted: power, balance, character and the craftsmanship is exceptional.

These are the influences but, of course, I had my own ideas and I wanted to create my own guitars. Recently I was inspired by three other guitar makers: Torres, Santos and Hauser. I was lucky enough to restore a Santos Hernandez guitar that I found quite magical and I'm trying to achieve something of that sound character in my guitars, but with more volume.

Have you tried double-top or lattice construction?

C. D. – I did an experiment: I made my first ever double-top guitar, with the help of Andreas Kirschner, a German colleague, and at the same time another, identical guitar, with a simple five-bar fan top. I preferred the conventional one; the double-top had quick notes but something was missing. I think that if you are a guitarist, playing to an audience, the sound of your guitar doesn't

Guitar inspired by a 1929 Santos Hernandez.



"I take my inspiration from a 1940 Hauser."

"Recently, I listened to a recording of Carles Trepat with his Torres guitar and I thought: that's what I want."

have to be loud; it has to be well balanced, it has to have beauty, allure, and people will hear it. I hate these "typewriter" guitars!

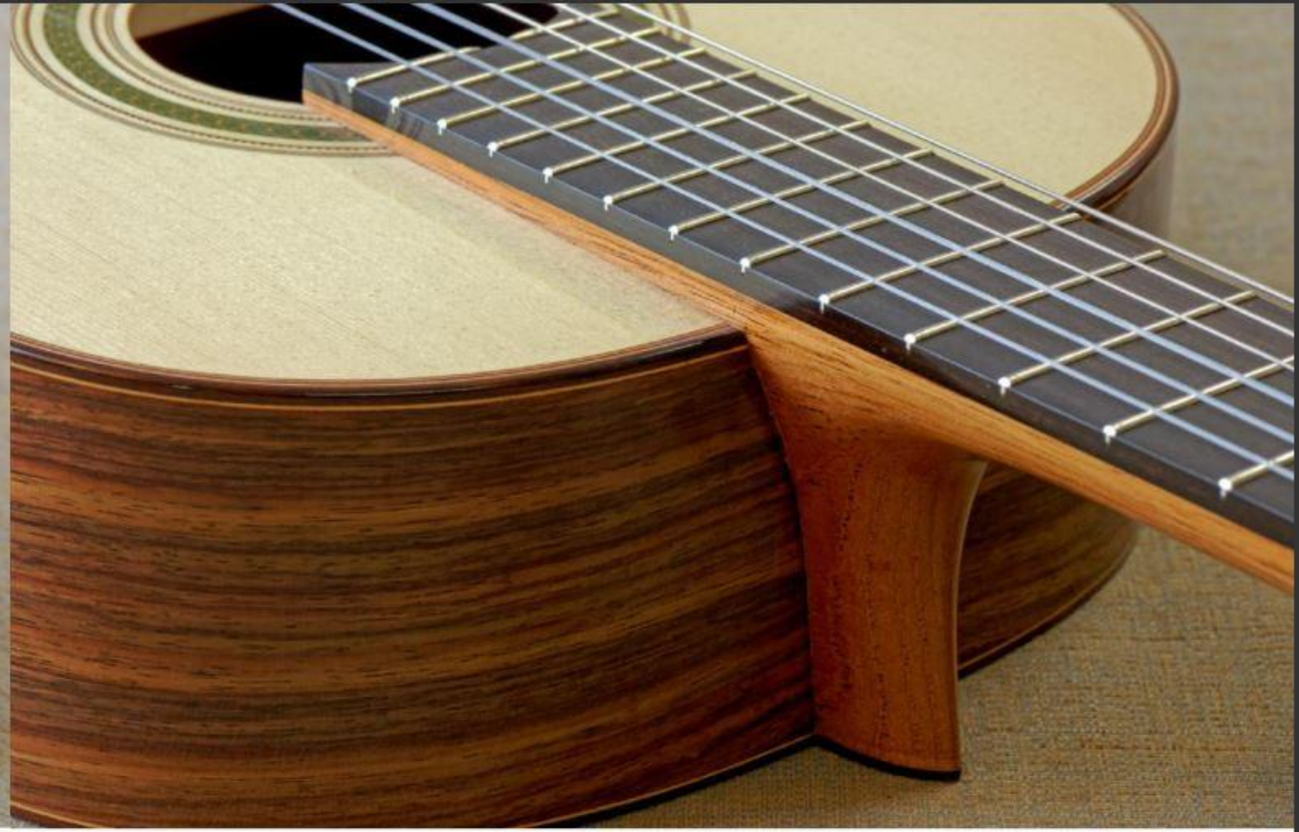
Are you worried about the new wood regulations?

C. D. – I met Walter Verreydt in Belgium; he had a guitar with back and sides of Lebanon cedar (*Cedrus libani*) and a spruce top. It was fantastic and very exiting to see that we can use other species. If we have to change and can no longer use rosewoods, I would love to work with cypress or other non-tropical woods, like yew or fruitwoods.
Recently, I listened to a recording of Carles Trepat with his Torres guitar and I thought: that's what I want, that's why I started doing this! It was beautiful. That inspired me to craft some guitars in cypress, to keep that sweetness. The cypress produces a different sound to rosewood. I listened to something that I wanted to hear, and I loved it. For the tops I prefer spruce (which I buy in Italy); I do one or two guitars per year with cedar tops, but my preferred wood is spruce.

A Kingham, with three-piece soundboard in spruce.

© Josh John (2)

Kingham head design.



The Kingham's elevated fingerboard rests on a layer of cedar.

"The Kinghams are simple, honest guitars that I build in a different way."

Do you build only concert models?

C. D. – I'm doing another, less expensive, model named Kingham. The Kinghams are simple, honest guitars that I build in a different way, making the body separately to the neck. The rosettes and bracing are simpler, I spend less time on polishing and the tuners are less expensive. For this model I include an elevated fingerboard, although it's not as extreme as Humphrey's one. It's just a bit higher, making it easier for the player and easier for me to build: the ebony is glued to a piece of cedar, and then I plane the cedar, and it is less work for me that way. The most time consuming part is the French polishing and it's very difficult to speed that up.

For the tops I use three or four pieces of spruce. I have lots of wood, of high quality, but some pieces are not quite perfect, so I cut them, keep the best parts and glue three or four pieces together to make a soundboard.

I keep the large, best quality woods for the concert model. I use Brazilian rosewood for the back and sides. I have enough Brazilian rosewood for eighty or more guitars. The backs and the tops of the concert guitars are arched, I fit top-of-the-range Rodgers tuners. Overall, the sound of my concert model is more complex.

I produce 12 to 14 guitars a year and I have built more than 450 guitars with my label.

Have you made copies of the old masters?

C. D. – A luthier can inspire you but you can't really copy somebody's work. Theoretically, if you make an exact copy an old master guitar, it should sound like the master's guitar, but it doesn't. I never say that it's a copy; I prefer to say that it's "inspired by".

I have made eight or nine guitars inspired by a Santos Hernandez 1929 that I restored.

I have also constructed some guitars inspired by Torres and Hauser.

"I have plenty of high-quality wood."

Kevin Aram, an eclectic luthier

He builds classical guitars for a living and makes acoustic, electric and cigar box guitars for fun! Interview with an unconventional luthier.

The Aram model takes its inspiration from Hauser guitars.

He braces his guitars following Jeffrey Elliott's open harmonic bars system.

"I build the guitars in the Torres and Hauser tradition."

When did you start guitar making?

Kevin Aram – I started buying electric and acoustic guitars, fixing them up, repairing and selling them, but it was impossible to make a living. Since moving to North Devon in 1991 I have concentrated mainly on the development of classical spruce-top guitars in the Torres and Hauser tradition. José Romanillos helped me a lot when I started building classical guitars.

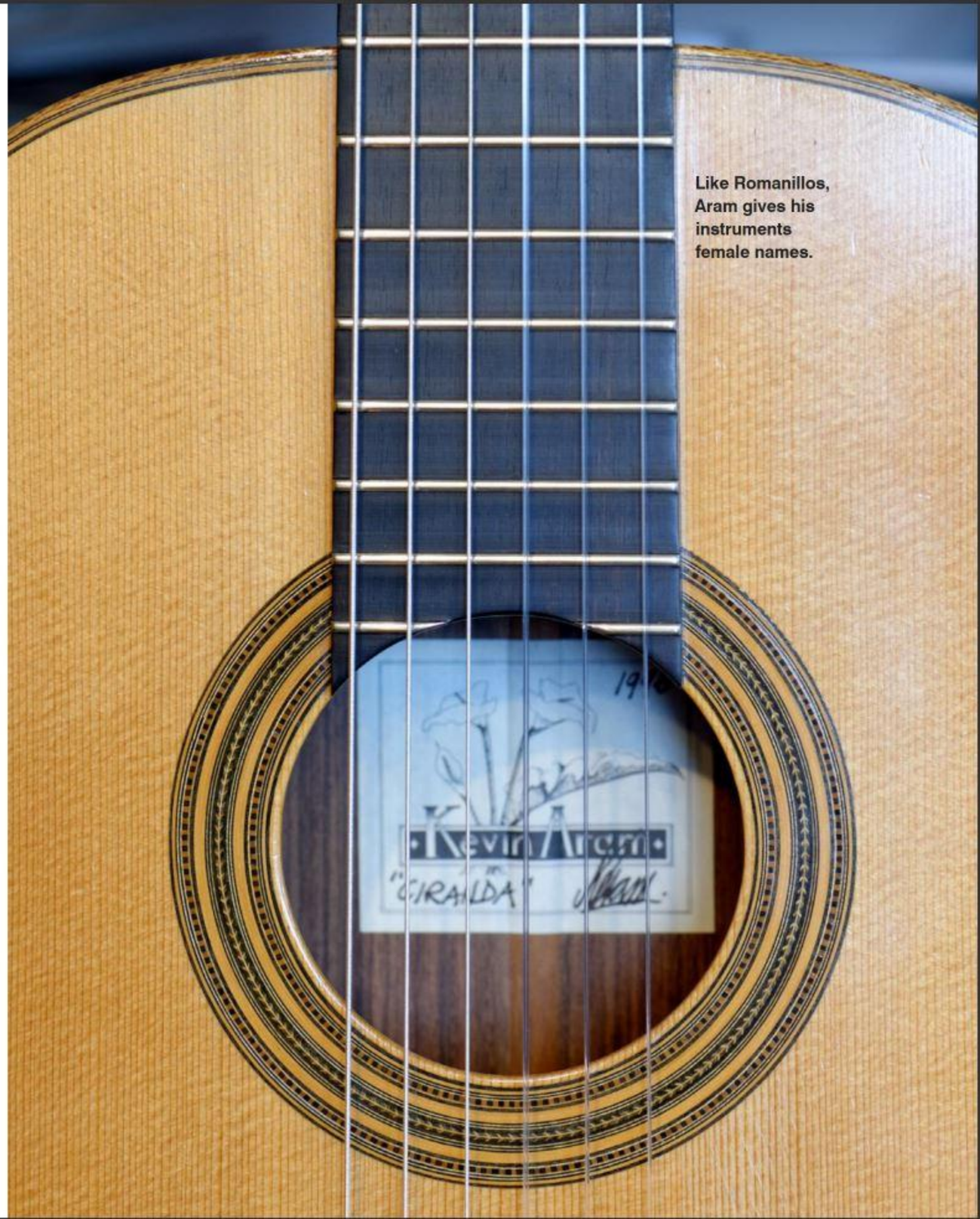
Now, I build guitars based on Jeffrey Elliot's system of open harmonic bars, using the plans published by G.A.L.

I don't like big guitars. I have noticed that the small-bodied guitars, like the Torres ones, have better projection and a more balanced sound.

Which woods do you use?

K. A. – I use mainly Indian rosewood for the back and sides, and spruce for the tops. Other choices include maple, ziricote, yew, walnut, Madagascar rosewood, African blackwood, cypress and Brazilian rosewood. I love cypress guitars – I don't consider them flamenco guitars – but people don't want them; it's hard to find customers. People prefer darker woods for the classical guitar.

It's surprising, since various fruitwoods were



Like Romanillos, Aram gives his instruments female names.

He uses a Techdeck workstation, made in Canada.

In his thirty-five years as a luthier, he has made over 400 classical guitars.

"I build the guitars the Spanish way: upside down, starting with the top and the neck."

used in lutes – apple, cherry, pear and others – but classical guitarists are very conservative.
I source some of these woods locally (ash, lacewood, beech), from the farms nearby. I used to buy a whole tree that I would cut and pick up with my Land Rover.
For the necks I prefer to use Brazilian cedar and for the fingerboard I use ebony.

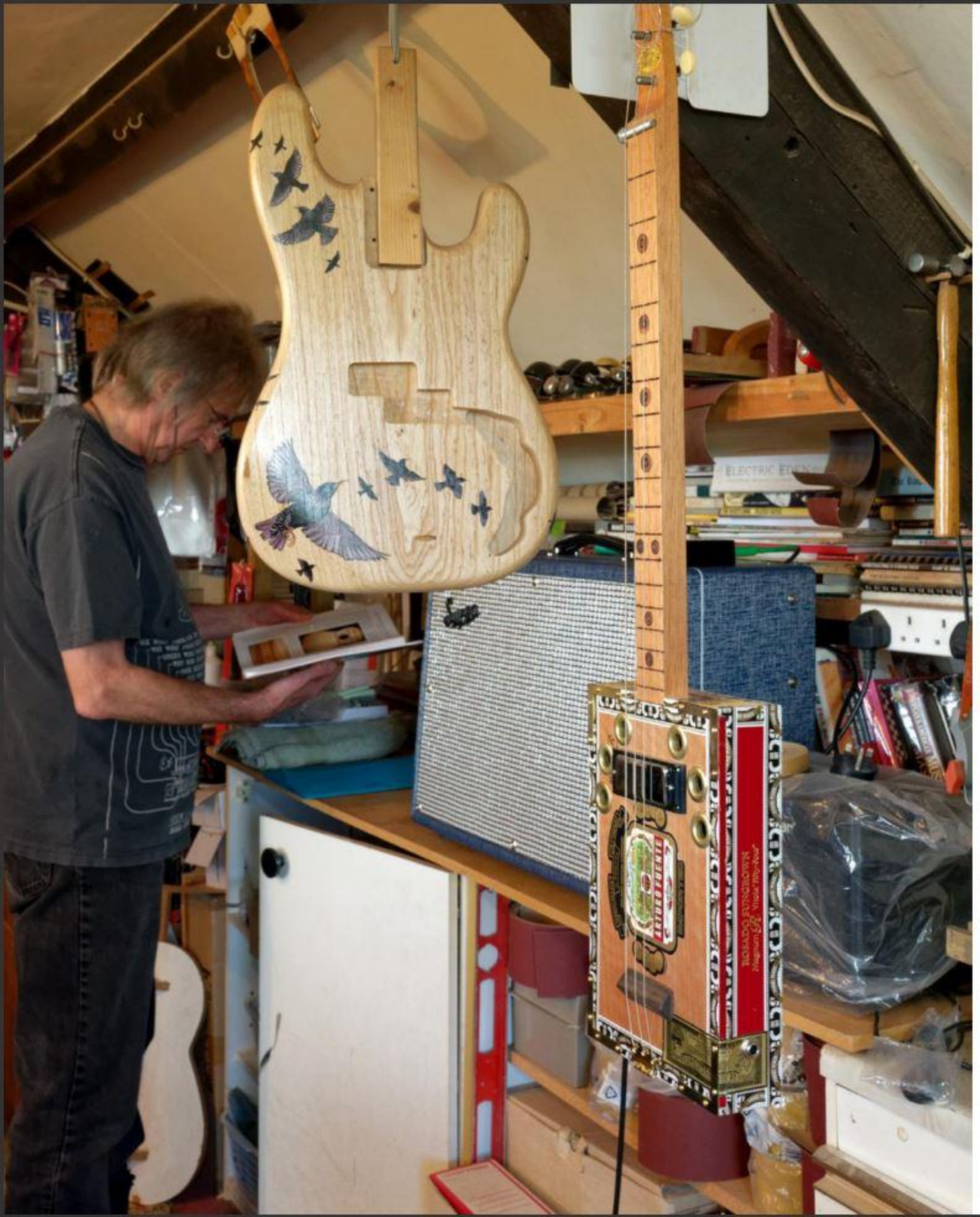
Which building methods do you use?
K. A. – I build the guitars the Spanish way: upside down, starting with the top and the neck.
I use a TechDeck workbench, made in Canada, which is very practical, particularly for repair work. The straps allow me to set the guitars in any position.

The heads of my guitars have three arches, like those of Torres. The bracing is quite symmetrical, and is based on Jeffrey Elliott's system.
I make everything on the guitar; only the strings, the frets and the tuning machines are not my own work. The machines come from Rodgers; they are lovely and they last a long time.

What sound do you have in your mind?
K. A. – I like José Romanillos' guitars and I have loved every Torres that I've ever seen and heard. I think that this is the sound I have in mind. Probably Santos' sound also.

Do you use French polish or another finishing?
K. A. – I prefer an oil finish to French polishing. For over fifteen years this is the only surfacing that I've given my instruments, and I have finished more than two hundred guitars like this. It's far less time consuming.

"The headstocks on my guitars have three arches, like those by Torres."



He produces flamenco, steel-string acoustic, electric and cigar box guitars.

It requires meticulous preparation and the wood needs to be sanded to absolute perfection. Since the oil does not penetrate deeply into the wood, it does not deaden the sound. It makes the wood harder and more resistant to denting.
It offers very good protection, probably better than that of French polish. But less effective, of course, than modern sprayed lacquers.
I think that the guitars sound better this way than with any other finish but many guitarists don't like the oil finishing because it's not glossy.

How many guitars do you make per year?
K. A. – I make approximately twelve guitars a year. In total, over the past thirty-five years, I have made more than 400 classical guitars.

I have built instruments for many musicians but my best-known customer is Julian Bream. He purchased the guitar "La Cancion" from me in October 1986 and a second guitar, "Myrtle", in 1988. Julian used both instruments for concerts worldwide and "Myrtle" was used to record the *Popular Catalan Folksongs* on the recording *La Guitarra Romantica*.

How many models do you offer?
K. A. – Basically, two models: the Hauser, which I call the Aram model, and the Torres. But I see them more as "inspired by" than "copies of". Like Romanillos, I give ladies' names to the guitars.
I also make occasionally Flamenco guitars, steel string acoustic, electric and cigar box guitars.

The back of this guitar is of rosewood and yew, and the rosette is beech (pictured right).

You are a very eclectic builder…

K.A. - Well, I don't play classical music – I prefer blues – and so I'm interested in these other guitars, too. I would say that classical guitar building is my business and the others are more like a hobby.

Why do you build these cigar box guitars?

K. A. – I don't know, I just love them! They're something completely different. If you plug them in and add some distortion you can get a nice bluesy sound. I build different models: three-string fretted or fretless. I have also built a four-string dulcimer.

Here, I have an electric cigar box guitar with a Telecaster maple neck, Goto tuners, Bareknuckle pickups and a Brazilian rosewood fingerboard. It's like a custom shop Fender guitar but in a cigar box format and it sounds fantastic!

These guitars don't have a huge following here in England but in America they are very popular. Originally, people who had no money would make them. Lots of American blues players started out with these instruments when they were kids. These simple instruments make music, and that's the important thing.

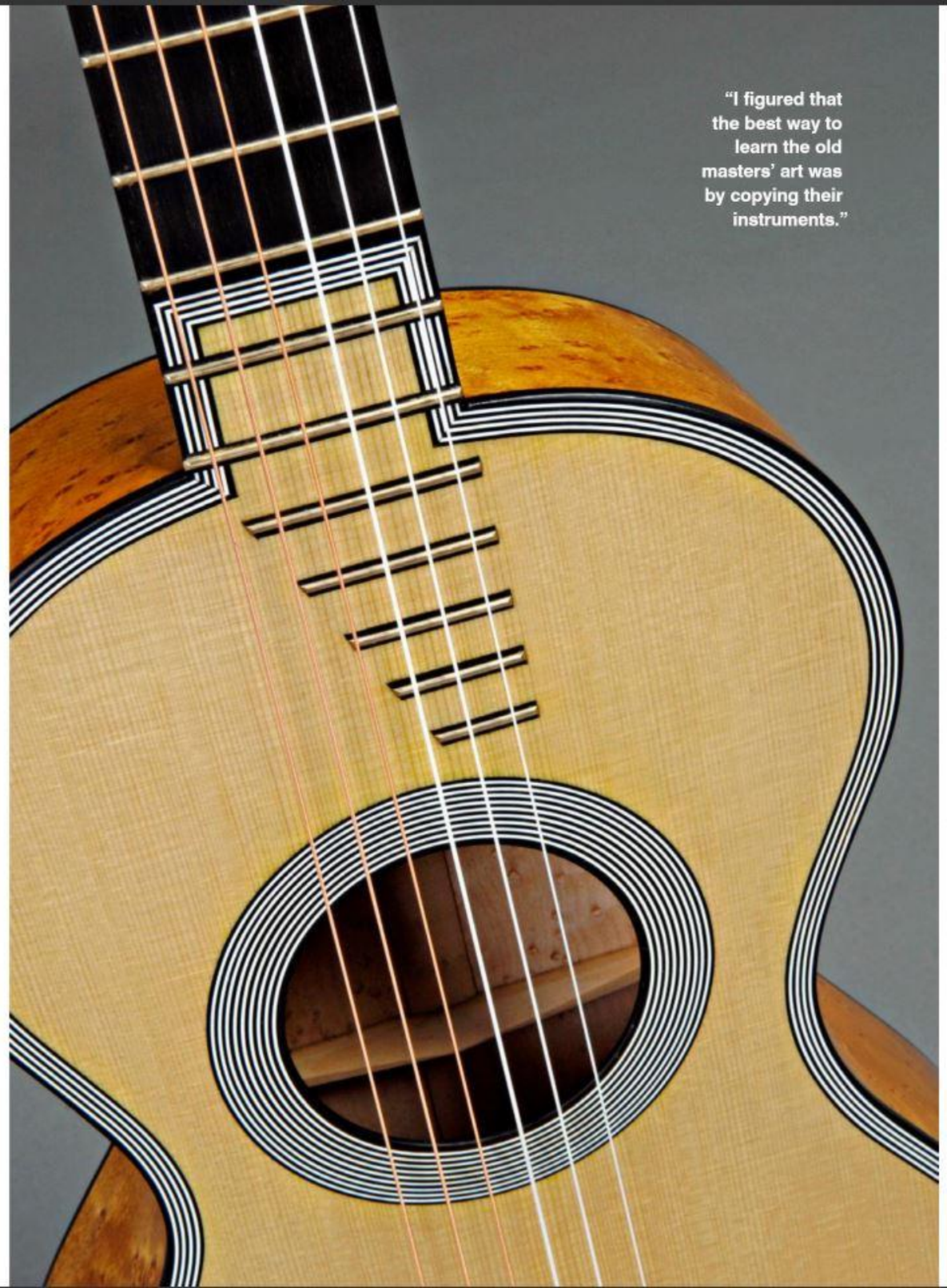
"Oil finishing is excellent, and likely affords better soundboard protection than French polishing."

The Atlantic Ocean thrashes the cliffs of Hartland Quay (North Devon), just a few kilometres from Kevin Aram's place.

Gary Southwell, out of love for the old masters

In his early career Gary Southwell focussed on historical guitars, making replicas and repairing Lacote, Stauffer, Pagés and other nineteenth-century guitars. Today, he builds both historical and modern guitars and is firmly established as a luthier with a very innovative interpretation of the contemporary guitar.

Gary Southwell works in the company of his lurchers, cross-bred sighthounds.



"I figured that the best way to learn the old masters' art was by copying their instruments."

© Phil Wilson (4)

Outstanding replicas of Lacote, Panormo and Torres by Gary Southwell.

How did you become interested in historical guitars?

Gary Southwell – I studied at the *London College of Furniture* but I took a different path to Christopher Dean and Michel Gee, simply because of my interest in historical guitars. I figured that the best way to understand the old masters was to try copying their instruments. I was the first maker to build serious copies and perform restorations of these old guitars, so I started working for the musicians who played on them and very quickly I found myself repairing Lacote, Stauffer, Pagés and other guitars of that period. At the same time in this country, there was strong interest in re-discovering early music, so I was immersed in that world for the first ten years of my career.

And then?

G. S. – I returned to modern classical guitar making in 1992 and I started developing my own concert guitar model, working with the American guitarist David Starobin. He had one of my Stauffer guitars, which he loved, and he asked me to built a modern guitar with greater power and projection but with the very fast, responsive sound and the clarity of the Stauffer.

He also wanted the Stauffer's adjustable neck, so I refined the system a little whilst keeping it very simple, as it was the one invented by Stauffer. It's not like a truss rod that changes the curve; you can adjust the angle of the entire neck just by turning a key. The advantage is that if you want to play louder, really hard, then you can raise the

Stauffer's guitars are one of his primary sources of inspiration.

Sticking firmly to animal glue.

"I build copies of early guitars, making them as faithful to the original as I possibly can."

strings to avoid buzzing; or, if you want to play something more delicate, you can adjust it to have a very low action, making it easier to play.
David wanted to blend the best of both worlds and he pushed me to create a modern guitar which shares some of these early instruments' qualities but which offer another sound, quite different to that of the Spanish tradition.

Did you stop copying the old masters?
G. S. – No, today I work in two different directions. On the one hand I build copies of early guitars, making them as faithful to the original as I possibly can. I don't mess with the design; I don't make changes that I think might improve the sound; and I keep them very pure, true to the original design.
On the other hand, I also have own design – something worlds apart from a Torres. Today, most guitar makers are building on the Torres and Hauser tradition, but I have a different sound in my head. Why not create a modern sound and do something original?
In 1995, Julian Bream came to me because he

Bespoke tuning machines by David Rodgers.

Detail of the rosette on a Hauser replica that has come back for repair work (this page and facing).

Southwell uses a vacuum press for certain gluing processes.

For fifteen years he studied Julian Bream's Hauser 1940 guitar

was looking for someone who could make a good copy of his Hauser 1940 (borrowed from Rose Augustine). I worked for him for about fifteen years and I learned a lot. He knows so much about guitars and he has great intuition about how the instrument works.
For fifteen years I copied this one guitar and we refined certain aspects of it, aiming for a sound as close as possible to the original. He said to me many times: "I'm not looking for a good guitar; I'm looking for the exceptional guitar".

Which woods do you prefer?
G. S. - I like Indian rosewood, and I love maple guitars; the sound is fabulous. If I were given absolute freedom to make a guitar from any material at all, I would choose the English black oak or maple.

The “A Series” model, featuring some magnificent 5,000 year-old black oak.

"I have a decent stash of black oak in my workshop."

The meaning of this Neolithic symbol is unknown.

By turning the key, the neck angle is easily adjusted.

Tuning machines inspired by Lacote's guitars and tailor-made by Rodgers.

How did you come to use this Fenland Black Oak?

G. S. – Many years ago, back in the 1980s, when people started to be concerned about the destruction of rain forests, I experimented with European woods, like walnut, yew and others. I was looking for a dark wood to use as an alternative to ebony for fingerboards and I came across this bog oak.

The reason why it's so good – and why it has a back-story – is that it lay in the earth for 5,000 years; it's semi-petrified. If you compare it with a piece of modern oak, it's much denser and harder. When this wood comes out of the ground and dries it splits terribly, and so it's hard to get big pieces of it, so in the beginning I used it only for fingerboards. Then, five years ago I met a furniture maker who was working with this wood. He had found a way to slow-dry the wood, a process taking about six months, to prevent any splitting. So I made a guitar with the back, sides, fingerboard and bridge using this wood and the guitar had a fantastic sound.

The back-story may be fascinating but it's just a back-story; the real question is whether that wood works well in a musical instrument and if it didn't, I wouldn't be working with it. I have enough to last me a long time. It's not easy to find but it comes from this area.

The highly innovative soundboard bracing.

Can you tell us more about your own model?

G. S. – The A Series guitar, as I named it, has a cutaway that makes easier to play the high notes. It doesn't change the sound but many people don't like it.

I include a bone symbol that comes from the Neolithic sacred sites all over Europe. Nobody knows what it means but it matches the age of the wood.

The guitar edge binding is made with ox horn and the rosettes combine ox horn and oak. The head design comes from the shape of the cutaway and the Lacote style tuning machines, by David Rodgers, work very well with these curved edges.

And what about the bracing?

G. S. – As the neck is not attached to the soundboard, there is no reason to reinforce the soundboard around the fingerboard, so this area is left free to vibrate.

I have two long curved bars, like struts, glued to the top and two floating carbon fibre bars to keep the body stiff. Because the neck is not attached to the body, the strings push it into the body and create some compression on the soundboard. These two carbon bars are the solution for keeping the body stiff and the soundboard as free as possible. They come from Scherzer, one of Stauffer's apprentices.

The arm rest enhances player comfort.

He used curved bars to reinforce his ten-string guitars for the same reason.

The back is arched in both directions, more than in a Spanish guitar – again this harks back more to the Viennese tradition. I include X-bracing to keep the back stable.

I build the back and sides of the guitar first and I put the top on last. And finally, I attach the neck to the body.

The sound is different to that of a Spanish guitar: there are not so many overtones around the fundamental note and that gives a lot of clarity to the voicing. The guitar is inspired by the Viennese tradition but has been designed to meet the needs of today's guitarists.

Ed: Recommended reading: *A study of Panormo guitar and its makers* by Gary Southwell. *Higher diploma in musical instrument technology 1981-83 session. London College of Furniture*.

The greatest collection of ancient oak trees anywhere in Europe has been discovered in Britain by a new survey of the grounds of Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire, in Winston Churchill's backyard.

Michael Gee, a luthier with a sweet tooth

He found his calling thanks to a moment of self-indulgence, went on to study and teach at the *London College of Furniture*, and worked with Martin Fleeson. Today he makes single-top and double-top guitars, and occasionally produces copies of historical guitars.

He has a collection of wood that has come from other luthiers.

How did you came to the lutherie?

Michael Gee – It's a silly story but it's absolutely true. In 1969, I was eleven years old and the music teacher told us that they were going to start a guitar club at the school. The problem was that, if we stayed on after school for the club, we wouldn't be able to get the bus and we would have to go back home on foot, which meant walking three miles to the end of a dark twisty road. A friend of mine, who was in the same class and lived in the same village as me, seeing that I was not interested in staying behind for the guitar club, said to me: "if you stay, I'll give you a Mars bar (a chocolate bar)"… and I accepted!

In the club, we learned some chords and we saw a film about guitar making that showed the Spanish makers in their workshops, sanding and polishing the instruments. And, believe me, my head exploded, it was like fireworks, and I said to me "I'm going to do this… I'm going to do this"!

As my father was a master craftsman, very shortly afterwards I started doing some woodwork: carving a neck, doing pegs or other guitar parts and I became passionate about this.

At sixteen I started studying at the *London College of Furniture* and that was the most fantastic time of my life: five days a week, nine to ten hours per day, learning and working. Herbert Schwarz was our teacher and his knowledge was phenomenal. He would always be looking over our shoulder, asking why we were doing things in such a way, but he never once said: "Do it this way". He would let us find our own way; it was wonderful. In 1977, I left the *London College of Furniture* and I set up my own workshop but in 1992, I came back to the College as a teacher.

What was your connection with Martin Fleeson?

M. G. – Martin Fleeson was a successful maker in England; even John Williams was playing a Martin Fleeson guitar before moving to Smallman.

In the eighties, I had an invitation from Martin Fleeson to build guitars for him. He had many orders from Japan and I agreed to work for him. Not to work with him, side by side; I stayed in my workshop, but the guitars were to look like his. The guitars were made with his head template, his rosettes and a special label. In December 1985, before passing away, he asked me to finish all the guitars that were in his workshop.

What is your building method?

M. G. – I learned to build guitars the German way: the body and the neck sepa-

Gee's construction method takes after the German school: separate neck and body.

For his tops, spruce predominates.

rately and subsequently attached with a dovetail joint. Now, as I'm working on a little Torres guitar – my favourite thing ever – I have to do it the Spanish way.

Which makers inspire you?

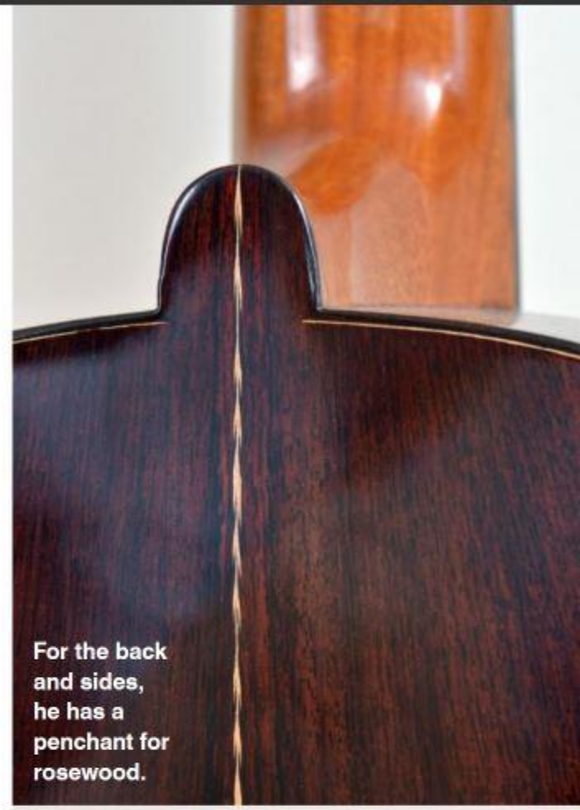
M.G. - I had a Vicente Arias guitar, light as a feather, and for me he was an exceptional luthier. It's curious: Arias made the most beautiful rosettes ever and when you look inside the woodwork is very simple and quickly finished. I love Arias; there is something about his work that fascinates me.

I also like the guitars from Torres, Simplicio and García. I like the craftsmanship and the sound of these guitars. And among the modern makers, I obviously like Daniel Friederich. Luthiers have always followed the demands of the players and today the sound is becoming more powerful but more metallic, and this is not the sound that I like.

How many models do you make?

M. G. – I have two different models: normal-top and double-top, which I call a "layered top". I've known about Nomex and its qualities for quite some time: in 1998, the *London College of Furniture* was associated with the Cranfield Institute that worked for *British Aerospace*. Cranfield wanted to see if carbon fibre could be used for instruments, and we made some tests.

The guitarist Graham Devine pushed me to make



For the back and sides, he has a penchant for rosewood.

The headstocks are reminiscent of Hernandez y Aguado.

double-top guitars and I'm happy with the results. I tried some lattice bracing but I didn't like it. I used to give my guitars a John Gilbert bridge. I stopped because people get the wrong idea when they see that kind of bridge; they imagine that my guitars will sound like Gilbert's, which they don't. The great thing with Nomex is that people don't see it, so they don't have any preconceived ideas about it.

Tell us about your bracing.

M. G. – Unless I'm making something like a Torres or a replica, I never use symmetrical bracing. All my guitars have been asymmetrical. In general I make taller central braces so that I can give the side pieces a very low profile. I feel like I have more control over the sound.

And your favourite woods?

M. G. – I use mainly Indian and Brazilian rosewood for the back and sides. I love to work with cypress; it smells great. For my tops I use mainly spruce. I have lots of wood from various other luthiers. One of my projects is to build a very special guitar: using a soundboard from Hector Quine, the luthier who made one of Julian Bream's first guitars; do the back and sides with Brazilian rosewood from Paul Fischer and David Rubio's stock; use the wood offered to me by Romanillos for the bracing; and give it a cedar neck from Daniel Friederich. That's a challenge!

Flamenco guitar built at the request of a friend, with a herringbone rosette (detail on opposite page).

David Rodgers: only the best will do

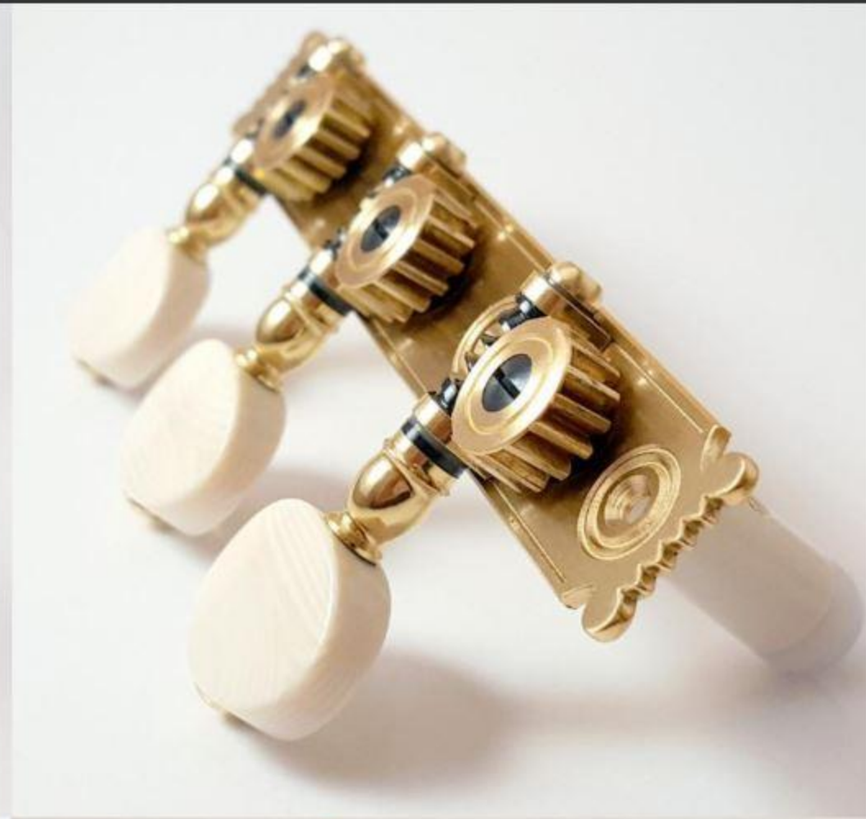
For almost forty years David Rodgers has been established as one of the world's best guitar tuning machine makers, and some of the most beautifully crafted instruments are bejewelled with his creations.

"At home I've always had a workshop, some tools and a lathe."

Tiny parts are kept safe in these trusty St. Bruno pipe tobacco tins.

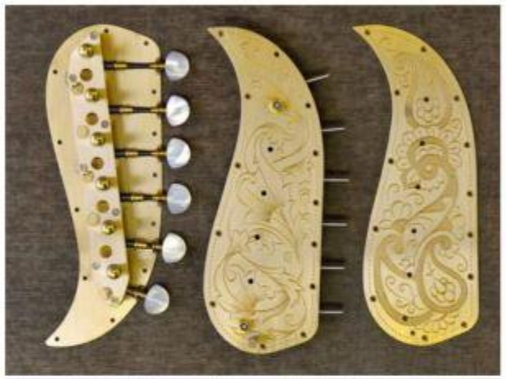
“I have always enjoyed model making.”

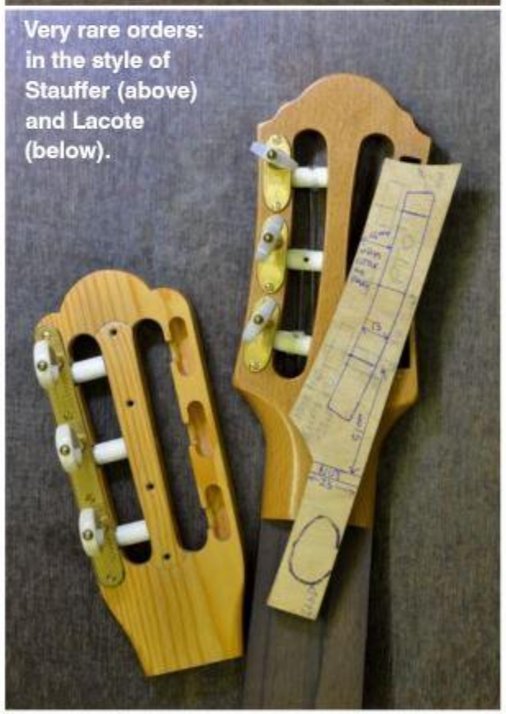
How did you start making tuning machines?
David Rodgers – I was an engineer, working as a machine-tool designer, when one day my wife Muriel’s cousin asked me to make a set of tuning machines for a replica of a nineteenth-century guitar he was making.
I didn’t know anything about guitars or machine heads. I have always enjoyed model making and have practically always had a workshop, some tools and a lathe. So, I pushed my latest model steam locomotive to one side (where it remains to this day) and I tried. It took me quite a long time but I managed to make them.
My wife’s cousin was very happy with the result and he showed the tuning machines to David Rubio… and from then, I received orders from Rubio and, much to my surprise, I started receiving orders from abroad, from the U.S., France, Germany and Japan. So, in 1979, I started making tuning machines at home, full time, in my workshop. At that time there was a very good hand engraver, Dennis McCoy, who made all the side plate engravings.



© Rodgers (4)

"We don't churn out ten sets of machine heads, all identical. Each set is made to a customer's order."





Very rare orders: in the style of Stauffer (above) and Lacote (below).

How many models do you make?

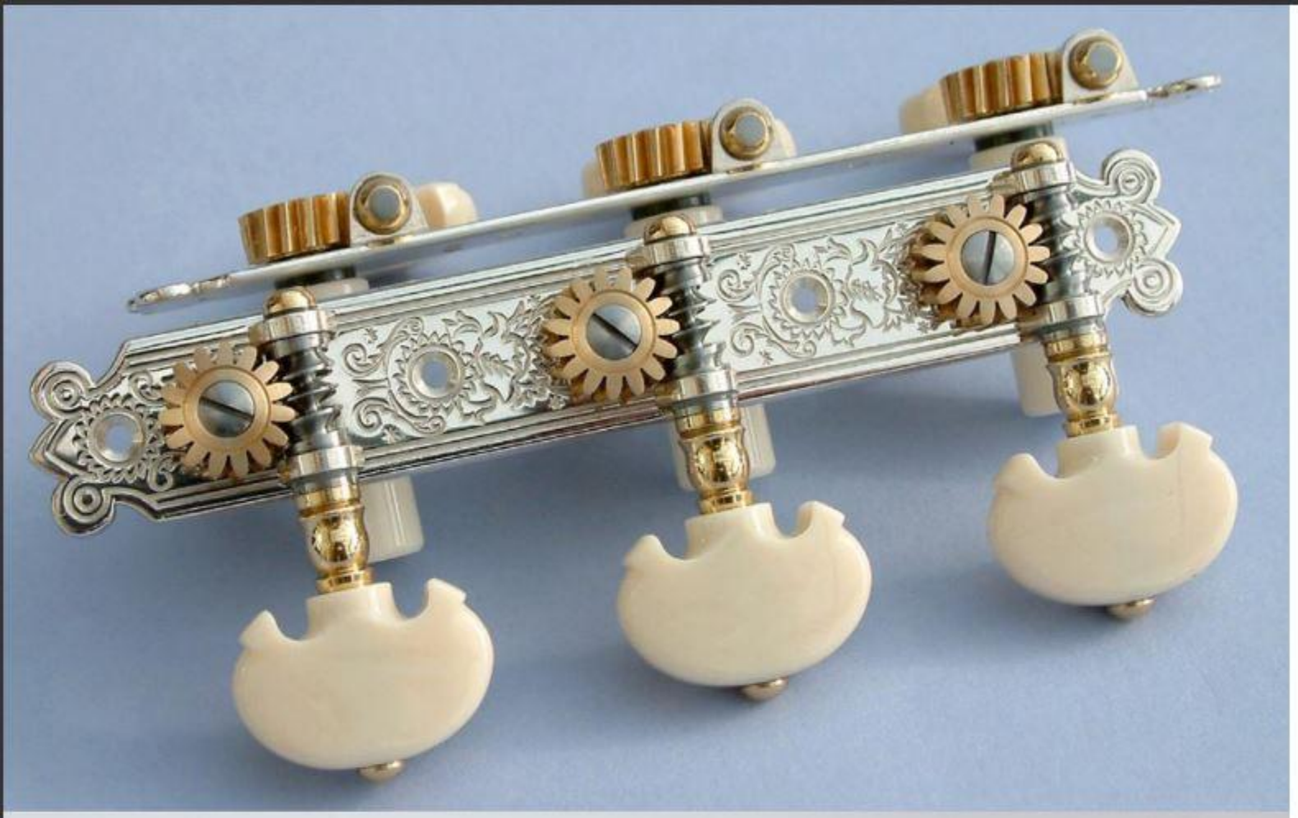
D. R. – Every one is different. We don't churn out ten sets of machine heads, all identical. Each set is made to a customer's order. The side plates can be made of brass, nickel silver or sterling silver; for the buttons you can choose mother of pearl, horn or different hardwoods.

When Dennis McCoy retired, we didn't even try to find another hand engraver. Dennis was so good that we thought it'd be impossible to find anyone who could work with such accuracy and excellence. As our daughter, Elisabeth, was studying art, we asked her for some pen and ink drawings of attractive designs on a 1:10 scale. She came up with some fifty different designs, in various styles, including geometric patterns, flowers and woven designs. We still use some of them.

I designed an engraving machine, computer controlled along three axes, and a young programmer made a special computer programme for us, to our specifications. Very often, the machine gears on old guitars are worn and so we also make replicas of the originals.

What are the main qualities of your machines?

D. R. – I think accuracy is one of our advantages. Our machine heads have practically no play at all in the gearing, and no jerking in the string rollers. Our rollers also turn very smoothly because on the outer end of each string roller – the part located in the centre of the headstock – we have a self-aligning bearing, stationary in the wood. It doesn't matter what the hole in the woodwork is like; the self-aligning bearing will align the roller, avoiding any additional load on the gearing.



"I can do 25 to 30 sets per month and Robert takes care of the orders from the rest of the world."

Another advantage is the deep meshing of the gear teeth and the big 15-tooth wheels which reduce the load per square millimetre. When we make wooden buttons, we don't leave the surface unprotected, we finish them with 7 or 8 coats of diluted super glue to have a very hard surface. It takes hours and hours to do it but they last forever. We have never ever had a single set back because of wear. We've had a few machines back for repairs but never because of wear and tear.

When did your son come to work with you?
D. R. – In 1990, after completing his engineering studies and his apprenticeship with a large precision machine tool company, my son Robert said that he would like to join me making machine heads. Initially we both worked here in my workshop and then, after he got married, he bought a house, which was just over the road, and he built his own workshop in the back garden. After twenty years or so, he decided to move to Nova Scotia in Canada. Probably he feels more independent; in Canada he is his own man.

How are you organised now?
D. R. – Robert makes the majority of the components: the gearing, the plates, and the buttons… He sends me a box every month with all the components for the European orders and I do the finishing here. I can do 25 to 30 sets per month and he takes care of the orders from the rest of the world. Robert and I, we like doing this job; we are very proud of what we make.

Paris, April 2018

Website: www.orfeomagazine.fr

Contact: orfeo@orfeomagazine.fr