

The Art and Craft of a Spanish Guitar

John Syropoulo

A BSS member enjoys his retirement learning about the magic of *La guitarra española* in Andalucía.

'It works. Good guitar.' These were the only words I needed to hear from Albert Nuijten, a superb, classically trained guitarist who was road-testing *my guitar* fresh off the workbench. That Friday evening, in a village in southern Spain, marked the culmination of a month of intense and hard work, stress and exhilaration. It felt surreal that I had made a beautiful flamenco guitar, in Spain.

Soon after arriving in the Andalusian village of *La Herradura* in October last year, I knew it would be the perfect setting to make an instrument that is so quintessentially Spanish - warm people, blue skies day after day (yes, even in October), the *azul celeste* Mediterranean, delicious food and a robust musical heritage. Set against the backdrop of the *Sierra de Almijara*, the village sits on a gentle slope leading down to *Paseo Andrés Segovia* which borders the spectacular two-kilometre, horseshoe-shaped bay, nestling between two large natural promontories.

Just off the town square, amidst a jumble of narrow streets framed by traditional whitewashed houses, is *Calle Canalejas*, with its delightful array of pebbled mosaics, one of which features a classical guitar, treble clef and pair





of sunglasses! I look up and on the wall of the adjacent building is a small unobtrusive sign: '*Stephen Hill, desde 1985, Constructor de guitarras*'.

It is a result of my love of playing classical guitars that I am one of four students enrolled in the European Institute of Guitar Making's (EIGM) course. Stephen Hill (UK born), a Master Classical and Flamenco Guitar Maker, is running the course, ably assisted by Alessandro Perciaccante.

Antonio de Torres made his first guitar in Granada around 1840 and was to set a style of guitar construction that has endured. Stephen (pictured with my in-progress guitar) is particularly well versed in the Granada style but has

added his own touches over the years. He is one of those people who, despite a disarmingly casual demeanour, exudes energy, intensity and perfectionism, quickly enveloping one in his passion for guitar making.

The workshop is very organised –well-lit, with appropriately-spaced work benches; variously finished guitar components hanging on the walls; tools stacked on shelving units in the middle of the room; and, of course, wood is omnipresent.

Most of us have an idea of the key, visible components of a guitar – a top (soundboard) with a hole surrounded by a mosaic pattern, the sides (ribs), the back and the neck/head. Seems simple enough, but it turns out high-end guitar

construction is analogous to making a complex and incredibly precise jigsaw in wood, where almost every piece (around 240 in total; runs into the thousands if the rosette is included) has to be individually crafted (often involving fractions of a millimetre) and glued together to achieve a stable structure. A real challenge.

We are guided by a detailed 215-page instruction manual and expert instruction. The woods chosen are based around tonal quality, structural quality and beauty of grain and colour. The various components are then crafted with precision using an array of over 80 different tools.

A very simplistic take on the assembly of the key components comprises: the neck/head is glued to the top; the top and back are glued to the shaped sides via tapered strips of wood around the guitar's inside seams; fine wooden veneers are glued around the edges of the top and back; all surfaces are sanded until they are perfectly smooth; the bridge is positioned and glued to the soundboard and the nut on the neck; insert the machine head; string up.

It has taken 160 intensive hours to complete the guitar. Hit the strings and the energy of their vibration impacts the bridge, in turn creating waves that excite the soundboard of the guitar to generate music. Olé! French polishing completes this most beautiful instrument.

Sitting with the others in the intimate courtyard of *Vinoteca Château* after a hard day in the workshop, a bottle of Rioja *tinto* and plates of trozos de jamón y queso at hand, was bliss. Despite the



stresses and strains of the day, and being well out of my comfort zone, I felt so *alive*.

Stephen aptly describes guitar making as 'this beautiful profession.' Marrying science, art, human emotions and skills, and natural elements to produce a musical instrument encapsulates something unfathomable, almost spiritual. And it was inspirational working with a true master.

Hasta luego, La Herradura. I will be back. And Stephen and Ale – thank you. ♦

Note on the author:

John Syropoulo is retired and from a financial industry background.