

13 Guit *Art* international

Jan / mar 2006

guitart international
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The Making of Spanish Guitars

A tour through Southern Spain, sponsored by the Spanish Guitar Master Craftsman's Guild and the Spanish Ministry of Trade

Flying over the parched landscape of Castile - where rain had not fallen for many months - I found myself thinking about the evolution of the modern guitar. Here in Spain the court music of the Renaissance combined with the folk music of Andalusia to create a versatile, expressive instrument of fire and sadness - the "Spanish Guitar." This simple design, affordable and accessible, spread throughout Europe and beyond. Consigned to the sidelines by the ascendancy of the piano and the orchestra in the mid 19th century, the guitar has yet prevailed: embraced by the popular music of the 20th century, the guitar has come into its own as the most popular musical instrument worldwide. As part of a tour sponsored by the Spanish Guitar Master Craftsman's Guild and the Spanish Ministry of Trade, we were here to examine in detail the Spanish guitar manufacturing industry.

Our first stop was the factory of

Manuel Rodriguez. Building on the experience of three generations, Manuel Sr. and his sons Norman and Manuel Jr., have adapted the art of guitar craft to mass production. The first generation of Rodriguez luthiers, Manuel Sr.'s father, began as a finisher in the workshop of Jose Ramirez I. His heirs now run a factory which turns out over 18,000 instruments a year. Nonetheless, they remain faithful to the important traditions of Spanish craftsmanship and attention to detail.

Starting with stacks of wood from all over the world drying in a large storeroom, we followed the progress of a guitar from sawmill to construction to finish - "three factories in one," as Rodriguez liked to say. Fascinated, we watched C & C routers carve necks and head stocks, six at a time. Despite the routers, planers and other impressive machinery, skilled craftsmen are still required for guitar construction. Certain details are crucial:

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gluing the purfling so that no gaps occur. The process of hand-tying the ropes so that the purfling is pressed into place is rough work, putting much stress on the neck. Machines cannot do this. Gluing the sides to the necks so that the neck is at the correct angle is another crucial step. Machines help, but the human eye and hand must guide the tools to achieve the proper neck set.

Cutting, gluing, wet sanding, polishing, the finishing of small details – a visitor is invariably impressed by the bargain for the end user. So much hand work, so much time, so much human effort to construct a guitar! Measured by this effort, any guitar seems under-priced.

Manuel Sr. still retains a private workshop where he constructs his own instruments from start to finish, taking great pleasure in using the most exotic and beautiful woods and in creating intricate inlays and mosaics, work for which Spain has long been famous. Manuel Jr. reminds us that those who are buying guitars today should treasure them because wood of good quality is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain. We heard this warning often during our tour. We have heard about the shortage of quality woods from American luthiers and manufacturers as well.

All Spanish guitars use the so-called Spanish System Heel in which the top, back and sides are joined together with the neck into one piece – the heel. If, as many guitar makers claim, the weight and construction of the neck and its joint with the body significantly influence guitar sound, this design feature could play a significant role in creating the characteristic sound of Spanish guitars. The Spanish design also permits a light construction, further enabling sound projection. In combination with a solid top of spruce or cedar the Spanish design projects exceptionally

well – even when backs and sides are constructed of laminated wood.

We were impressed by our first factory tour because of its history, its scale and achievements and also by Manuel Rodriguez's evident love of guitar making.

After the tour we were treated to "lunch" Castilian style, wherein we tasted the specialties of the region, including crispy suckling pig with roasted potatoes, delicious olives and excellent wine.

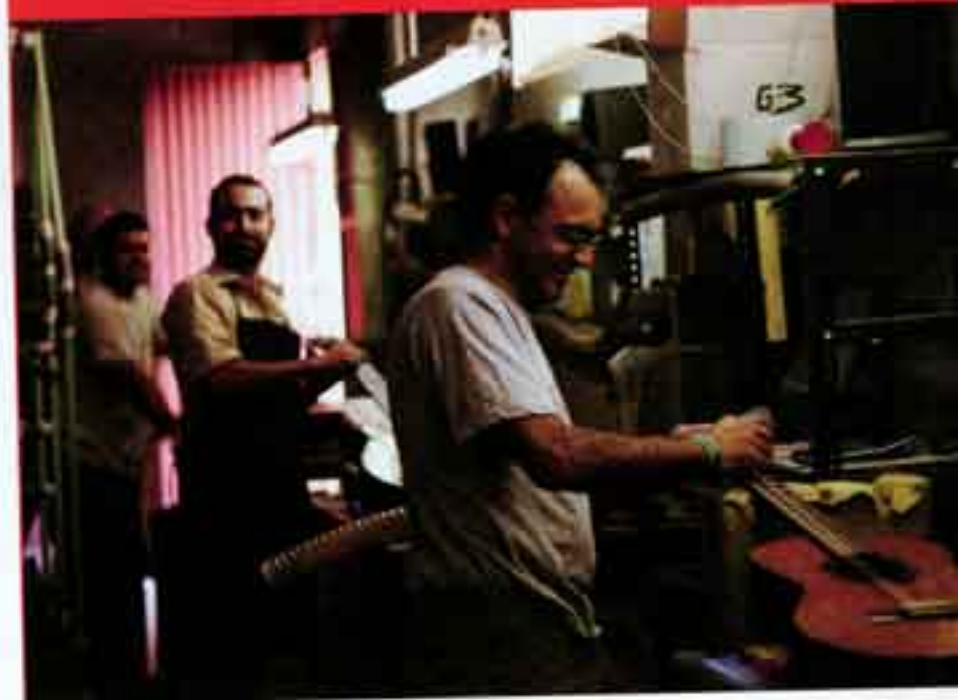
Next, we went on to Toledo, a short trip to one of Spain's most beautiful and historic cities, poised between two rivers and with its narrow, winding streets climbing the steep hillsides, and its cathedral all combined to create truly stunning views. The view of Toledo from our hotel was spectacular.

As we walked through the city that evening, we noticed a banner announcing a concert series scheduled to begin that day, September 5th. We found the venue, the ancient Cloister of San Pedro the Martyr, which was attached to the university, and bought tickets. Walking through the modern hallways from the entrance, we emerged into a colonnaded courtyard under the stars where a group called Axabebe, would perform Medieval and Sephardic music. (The Axabebe is a double-reeded instrument used in the program. It sounds similar to a krumhorn or a bagpipe without the bag. It could be a precursor to the oboe.) The music was very beautiful and faithfully and skillfully performed by the female vocalist/percussionist, the wind player (recorders, flutes and axabebe) and the string player (vihuelas, lutes and hurdy-gurdy). It was a magical moment.

The next day we arose early and drove to the small town of Casimarro, (population 2500) to visit the workshop of Vicente Carillo, a 4th generation luthier



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in a town with a long reputation for guitar making. Though the town had been known in the 18th century as the home of many guitar artisans, that reputation had died out, but is now in good hands with Maestro Carrillo and others. Upon the discovery the town erected a sculpture to commemorate the past, and also its importance as a center for the culture of mushrooms. (Indeed, the mayor had planned to meet with us but was engaged in the harvest of mushrooms in the nearby woods).

Before touring the workshop, Carrillo met with us in the town hall along with a representative from the mayor, to answer our questions and make a presentation about his construction process. He, like Rodriguez, emphasized the growing shortage of quality woods, and the impact that the Asian instrument manufacturers were having on the availability of premium materi-

als. He also explained that rather than expand his production, he deliberately kept his production low, to better maintain high quality.

The workshop of Vicente Carrillo reflects more of the image that outsiders have of Spanish guitar making – a small shop with only five apprentices who construct no more than twenty guitars a month. There is modern equipment in evidence, but many tasks are done entirely by hand.

The end result is impressive, however. Carrillo's guitars reveal the influence of individual attention to detail at each level of construction. The instruments were supple and responsive to the touch, with clarity and warmth. We tried them out to our great satisfaction! However, Carrillo guitars are at the higher end of the guitar spectrum. Carrillo produces only three classical and two flamenco models, priced between 2,300 and 6,000 euros.

In the afternoon we drove to the town of Almansa to tour the Almansa factory. We were met by Pedro Angel Lopez, the director, who took us through the attractive, modern facility (constructed originally in partnership with Manuel Rodriguez Jr., who designed and built the factory). Almansa has no in-house sawmill, but receives guitar parts custom-made from the Alhambra factory. This factory seemed more brisk and businesslike than the other workshops we had toured. Again at Almansa we observed the same techniques of construction, aided where possible with custom designed machinery and equipment. The gluing of tops to the Spanish system heel, attachment of the sides to the top, gluing of back to sides, gluing and tying down of purfling, fretting, spraying, etc.

The end result is a selection of models with a distinctive sound and remarkable consistency – in

In the previous page:

- › Vicente Carrillo
- › Almansa luthiers

Below:

- › A stack of guitars in production at the Guisama Factory
- › Guisama factory



other words, a high level of craftsmanship, especially for the output. Almansa manufactures about 21,000 instruments a year. After the tour, we had an Andalusian feast with an emphasis on regional dishes, including Andalusian Gaspacho, a stew containing bits of bread resembling pasta, and rabbit and snails. It was delicious! One of our Japanese companions had to refrain, however, in deference to his pet rabbit at home.

We arrived late in the day to fabled Valencia, a seaport town long known to us in America for its oranges as well as for its guitar production.

Early the next day we visited Raimundo and Aparicio while other members of our tour visited Esteve and Juan Hernandez. A third manufacturer in the area, Guissama, whose brand Prudencio Saez is well known to us, was not able to participate in the

tour at the last minute and sent literature and photographs.

At Raimundo we were met by Victor Raimundo, son of the founder, who graciously tried to balance our tour with that of another group guided by a city official. Raimundo manufactures its own guitar parts from its stocks of wood, which is carefully aged and controlled for dryness. Raimundo also emphasized the custom aspect of the equipment they used in the construction process; many of the machines were designed specifically for their own construction techniques. (I particularly remember the C&C router slicing long sheets of bent laminated sycamore into sides). Raimundo produces over thirty models, 12,000 - 15,000 guitars under their own brand and about 5,000 for other labels such as Ramirez, Contreras and Conde Hermanos, each with their own distinctive parts and design.

The price of their models ranges between 200 and 3,000 Euros, and many of the guitars are exported to Europe, the bulk of them going to Germany. From Victor Raimundo we learned that premium materials, such as cedro necks (a Spanish coniferous wood different from Western Red Cedar), are reserved for the better models. Top models have their own separate stock of materials and are constructed by separate luthiers. This practice we found repeated in all the large factories. Next to Raimundo in the town of Paterna is Aparichio. Once in partnership with Raimundo (the web address is still raimundoyaparichio.com). Aparichio chose to become an independent manufacturer in 2001, and while many manufacturing steps are the same, Aparichio has enjoyed doing it "their way". They cure their own wood by alternating controlled drying with exposure

Alhambra:
> Top of the line instrument, being hand-built in this section of the factory.





The sawmill portion of the factory was huge and the wood storage shed impressive for the quantity of wood stored there and for its organization and management

We were intrigued by their “silk screen” process for applying glue for various bracing patterns. It could be that their techniques were not unique, but it was the first time we had seen it applied. We were allowed to play a couple of finished guitars, which were very good instruments and had a unique voice.

After another bountiful and festive lunch, including the signature Valencian dish, paella, at a popular seaside restaurant, we rolled back to our hotel with much to think and write about. On Thursday, we drove into the mountains of the Alcoy region to the small town of Muro to visit Alhambra, the largest Spanish guitar factory.

At Alhambra the steps in the

manufacturing process that were by now familiar to us were on a much larger scale than in other factories we had visited. The application of technology was also more extensive. Here we saw for the first time vacuum presses for gluing bracing. Their large operation has its own machine shop where they make many of their own tools and maintain their equipment. The sawmill portion of the factory was huge and the wood storage shed impressive for the quantity of wood stored there and for its organization and management.

Recycling is an important aspect of the Alhambra manufacturing process. Outside we viewed a large dumpster filled with scrap, waiting to be burned as fuel.

Inside there was a separate room devoted to rendering sawdust into small logs which could be sold on the outside market as fuel or burned in-house. Waterfalls on the rear walls of the finishing spray booths collected ambient toxic spray for recycling. The origin of the Alhambra company differs from many of the other guitar manufacturing enterprises. Rather than evolving from a small workshop founded by a craftsman who loved to build guitars, Alhambra was a commercial venture from the start. Its success is demonstration that the traditional methods of Spanish construction can be learned and taught.

Alhambra began inauspiciously as a whimsical idea in the mind of its initial investor – who quickly bailed out, leaving the fledgling company, called “Hachi,” in the hands of its two main artisans. Those artisans, Ricardo Llorens and Jose Maria Vilaplana, were not originally guitar builders at all. Llorens and Vilaplana made wooden molds for machine castings and they were on a fast learning curve. Eventually other investors were found, who saved the fledgling company, which they re-named “Alhambra Guitar Works.”

In 1965, the factory began serious operations. They soon hired Jaime Julia, a university-educated engineer as director, leaving the guitar crafting details to the original two guitar makers. From its earliest days Alhambra sought to mechanize production as much as possible and sought advice about ways to improve their guitars in sound and appearance. They took their instruments to international music shows, and bore with patience the often negative assessment of their guitar line. They listened carefully and worked to improve their guitars. Gradually they won acceptance and eventually widespread critical acclaim. The scope of Alhambra is large and modern, and as a result they distribute

Above:
 › Manuel Rodriguez and Manuel Rodriguez Jr. display an incredible instrument, built by the father

more than 30,000 instruments worldwide. They have introduced steel string acoustic guitars, using the Spanish heel system, which compare very favorably with American made acoustics in sound and which are gaining acceptance, especially in Europe. Despite its sophistication, Alhambra is similar to the other guitar factories in several ways. Much hand work is still in evidence throughout. Also at Alhambra, as in other factories on our tour, there exists a small workshop where individually crafted guitars from special reserve stock are made. Jose Vilaplana, son of one of the original artisans, is one of the two master craftsmen. He has worked for Alhambra since he was fourteen years old. And so, as in the other factories, family tradition is very important at Alhambra. Jaime's son Luis works for the company, as does another relative, Jorge Julia, the export manager.

After our tour of the Alhambra factory we were treated to a grand "lunch" at L'Escaleta, a world renowned restaurant nearby, where we immensely enjoyed another memorable meal along with fine conversation, providing further insights into Spanish culture and cuisine.

On our way back to Valencia we stopped to observe a portion of the L'Olleria Guitar Festival. Arriving at the end of the day's performances, we were surprised by the sparse attendance. Although competitions do not usually attract large audiences until the final performances, this lack of interest by local people was a depressing reminder of the challenge that faces all of us who love the Spanish guitar and its traditions. The impact of popular styles of music, which utilize other types of guitars, has marginalized the classical guitar. What is required is an active campaign to enlighten the public to the versatility and beauty of this type of guitar. Keeping the musical traditions of solo guitar

playing vibrant and well is the first order of business for all of us who love the Spanish guitar. On Friday we were officially welcomed by the Mayor's office of Valencia. The importance of the guitar manufacturing industry to this region and to Spain as a whole was emphasized. Afterwards, we were given a tour of Valencia, the picturesque old sections as well as the impressive City of Arts and Sciences, a beautiful modern park with walks and museums, including the largest oceanographic museum in Europe.

In the evening we found our way to a local club where at midnight a family entertained us with flamenco-style music and dance. We were joined by several representatives of factories on the tour, including Manuel Adalid, director and namesake of the founder of Esteve guitars, and Rolf Lucas Jong of Francisco Bros. It was a festive occasion, our last gathering as a tour group. We enjoyed communal tapas and wine and also the music, which though not a professional Flamenco presentation, had a local following and a feeling of authenticity lacking

in many of the flamenco performances mounted for tourists. Back in Madrid we visited the shops of Contreras and Ramirez where we viewed many of the student models made by Spanish guitar factories as well as individually crafted models by the current in-house luthiers.

Later we visited the Ramirez workshop, where historically a whole school of fine luthiers gained their initial experience in guitar craft. Nowadays three in-house luthiers and two apprentices construct the guitars made famous by Andres Segovia. This was a small operation with very little in the way of machine tools - much traditional hand work at every stage of guitar construction.

Overall, the achievements of the Spanish guitar making industry is impressive. We were surprised by the extensive use of technology. Furthermore, much of the machinery looked well used, as if it has been there awhile, indicating that technology is not new to this industry. We would say, that with the exception of the small workshop, just as in the U.S. where attention to detail results in very high quality

Below:
Preparing to install Frets at the Rodriguez Factory



and a higher price, the technological aspect is on a par with any modern U.S. guitar manufacturer.

Also, as previously stated, we were impressed by the amount of hands-on craftsmanship required even in the most technologically sophisticated factories. The end result reflects this individual skill and expertise.

We were surprised that although there are different opinions and disagreements throughout the Spanish guitar industry, they all agree about certain elements of traditional Spanish design: the Spanish System Heel, solid tops and light construction.

The craft of guitar making, developed and refined over centuries is still carried out by individuals who construct an instrument from start to finish in small workshops with a few apprentices using hand tools. It has also been adapted for large factories using the latest computer-driven equipment. All of these co-exist where, despite diminishing stocks of quality materials, the end product has only become more consistently excellent. The sound of a Spanish made guitar is by and large unique. Its light-strong construction delivers a tone which is crisp and loud with a lot of velocity. The best Spanish guitars also have a complex tonal palette and good sustain with a solid, strong treble to express the most delicate melodic lines.

They are an inspiration and source of delight to players and their audiences.

In the end, there is much to be said for the long experience of craftsmanship and lutherie passed down from father to son, to nephew to apprentice and associates – passed down through a culture which nourishes it and forms it. The Spanish have taken this tradition and in our time have used all the innovations that technology can offer to make the guitar an even bet-

ter instrument, to make its unique qualities affordable for guitar players everywhere – to make it possible for guitar enthusiasts to experience the uniqueness of the Spanish sound.

The Spanish Guitar manufacturing industry is threatened by globalization, as is manufacturing in other industries of the west. However, the issue is not simply competition and jobs. Spanish culture and way of life are at risk as well. Spain, like other nations of the West, through conflict, wars and compromise, has achieved in its own way a decent life for its working class, reflected in paid vacations, reasonable working hours, health care, education and a living wage. All of these achievements are threatened if it continues to compete with the developing world where none of these amenities exist. Yet, whereas many consumer goods are not affected by their manufacturing origin, musical instruments, because of the amount of skilled hand work still required in their construction, are more uniquely affected by the culture of origin. We maintain that Spanish made guitars are still unique. Excellent guitars are made world wide; but they do not have the voice of Spanish guitars. For the discerning ear, the difference is well worth the price.

It is imperative that we fight to maintain this culturally valuable tradition.

Claire Petsch
Maple Street Guitars
October 28, 2005
Atlanta, Georgia USA

Photography courtesy of Merche Gonzalez
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