

THE INTERVIEW:

PETER OBERG



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Thanks for speaking to us Peter- I was wondering how you were inspired to build classical guitars?

My pleasure, Terence. Well, it's an interesting way to ask the question, alluding to an inspiration. I had been through several 'careers' already, and have a bit of a history of getting consumed by the learning phase of an endeavour.

I think it was time to jump into something new, and lutherie had interested me since the early eighties when I started woodworking, yet for no reason I can elucidate by 1995 I had still not build a guitar.

I have been a pretty serious player since I was 11, so that's over 45 years playing the classical guitar, but not always classical guitar repertoire. I played jazz and studied composition over the years, and often thought about what I wanted in the sound, a certain clarity and lushness that I had not heard all that often in other guitars.

I also dreamed about a nylon string guitar with extra courses of strings, especially one with a sympathetic course of steel strings...things like that. I was in some measure inspired by Fred Carlson, the California luthier who builds these magnificent instruments that are wildly creative.

I was also totally captivated by the sound of Barrueco's guitar on 'Sometime Ago', which strangely enough was built by Bob Ruck with whom I would later work for almost two years. And of course I was inspired by the notion that I could build my own instruments, not knowing of course that it would take some years to fully understand how a classical guitar functions most efficiently.

Finally, I would be remiss not to give my then future wife credit for sitting me down shortly after we met and asking me something to the effect of 'What more do you want to accomplish before you die, and might later in life regret that you never did.' That clearly ignited the flame.

And, did you sign up to a course or take up an apprenticeship?

Both actually. I did a seven week course with David Freeman in Canada, then realized upon return that I wanted to work in someone's shop before starting out on my own. I knew about Ervin Somogyi, and that he took apprentices from time to time, so I contacted him and managed to land a position.

Almost a year after we moved to Oakland, California so that I could work with Ervin, I found out from him that Robert Ruck was thinking about taking someone on. Ervin builds mostly steel strings, but my instrument has always been the classical guitar.

When I heard about a possible (paid) apprenticeship with Ruck I jumped all over that and contacted Bob, flew up to Washington state to meet him and his wife, and agreed to start as soon as we could make the move to Washington. I spent almost two years in his shop, and trust me it was a big eye opener.

What was it like working with Ervin Somogyi and Robert Ruck?

Hmmm...where to start? Both men are remarkable luthiers. Working for each was a completely different experience, which I suppose was to be expected. Besides being a consummate gentleman and possessing a dry and uncanny wit Ervin is an artist in a category all his own.

His aesthetic sense is very refined, and this I felt really rubbed off on me. I also learned a lot concerning how to approach an individual task-how to think about it, and how to develop the jig or fixture to accomplish it.

Ervin is less about quantity and more about quality, and his work shows it. As an apprentice I generally did what an apprentice would-make and prepare parts, scrape and sand, cut fret slots, etc. And sweep the floor of course, kind of old-world that way.



Since my core interest was in classical guitars and not steel string, I tried to absorb anything that might translate as useful in building nylon string guitars, as in how to approach the whole process, meaning the order of various tasks, detailing, jig making, voicing of the top...that sort of thing. It was great being in a professional luthier's shop and watching, and participating in, the creation of such sophisticated instruments.

Working with Robert Ruck was a whole other ballgame. Rob was incredibly gracious in taking me on, and for the most part did not hold anything back, as in how to thickness and brace tops, and some of the more esoteric knowledge gained from building guitars since the 60's.



Rob is an insanely good woodworker-his focus is kind of intimidating. I remember one day seeing him carve four necks before lunch-he would carve them and then I would do the finish sanding. 12 years later it still takes me all morning to carve and sand one neck! There is a good reason why he is sometimes called the Zen Luthier.

It was in Rob's shop that I really came to understand precisely how a classical guitar works, not just how to get at the sound I want, but mechanically, meaning all sorts of things the books don't really talk about, like bridge design and for that matter design in the greater sense, how the whole box works architecturally.

I realized about five years or so after leaving Rob's shop that I did not have to build a 'Ruck' guitar, and started applying more of an intuitive approach to shaping the sound, but being in his shop was definitely the starting point of finding that sound.

I did everything from preparing and bending sides, assembling bodies, gluing braces and neck joints...I was involved in pretty much every part of building except shaping the braces on the top and carving the head.

He was very trusting in giving me tasks, and I was definitely challenged to raise my level of work. Trial by fire I would call it. It was good though, even if trying and at times intimidating.

Again though, Rob and his wife were very gracious, and my wife and I spent some time with them outside of the shop environment. All in all a very powerful experience that had a profound influence on my life as a luthier.

Both men were very important mentors for me-I was quite fortunate to work with them, and owe each a debt of gratitude for the respective experiences.

Now, you're on your own- maybe you could share with us your build philosophy?

Since I built my first guitar in 1995 it has been the same-to build the best guitars on the planet. Problem is that there is no best guitar, no perfect instrument that would suit every player. A guitar that one player is crazy about might seem just average to the next guy. People hear differently, and they have more broad or narrow criteria to satisfy, as regards character of sound.

I've always felt that if I stay true to my 'sound', meaning I don't copy other makers' designs, that I would be creating something that would approach what I think is an ideal instrument. I don't have a 'sound in my head' that you hear other makers talk about. I think that sound lives more in the heart-I know that sounds kind of cheesy or fringe, but we are talking about emotion here, and emotions are born and live as much in the heart as they are in the head.

We respond to sound, and music in particular, very much from the heart-when we are moved to tears the emotion swells up in the chest and then flows to our eyes. If I stay connected to that emotional wellspring, and let the intellectual and academic thrust of building work through it, I feel like I'm creating something special. Does that sound delusional? (laughs)

There is a lot of emphasis on volume these days. I don't worry about volume; if the sound is clean, clear, and uncluttered then the volume is automatically there. Each note has to have the right balance between the fundamental and its overtones.

If one or more of the higher partials are over-emphasized the note will be harsh, nasal, metallic... the right balance makes for a beautiful, pleasing, round, crystalline sound. Soft yet powerful, and the dynamic range will be there too, if the setup is correct.

A funny thing about guitar makers and their guitars-of the 135 or so guitars that I've built, I have only made 2 or 3 that were 'exact' copies of another makers' bracing pattern. Those guitars don't sound like a guitar built by that maker, they sound like an Oberg.



And I've spoken about this with numerous luthiers. The maker puts something unqualifiable into his instruments, something of his personality. I'm definitely an intuitive builder, not a scientific one.

Doesn't mean I don't pay attention to how much the top or the bridge weighs, or to the geometry of the box or the neck angle, but rather that my emphasis is on trusting in my ability to know the way forward, armed with whatever anecdotal information I've accumulated, filtered through my connection to some degree of emotional and spiritual awareness. Hey man, I just build it, knowing it will sound pretty damn good! Does that answer your question?



Indeed! Some luthiers target a specific sound and alter wood choices and bracing whereas others take wood and aim to maximise the potential of each individual set- would you say you fell into one of these camps or straddle the two?

I'd say I do both; use each set to its fullest potential and tweak the bracing and maybe a few other elements of the design to get at the sound I want. Sometimes I'll double or triple the linings on the top to shrink the vibrating part, which seems counter-intuitive to some but is a very effective way of controlling the sound.

It has to be done in conjunction with other elements of the design, not just in a vacuum. This is true with every aspect of building, and I hear people talking all the time about one element, like neck angle or bridge design, and they are not taking into consideration that element's role in the bigger picture.

Anyway, yeah, I do both. I have three main bracing patterns that I use, and a number of variations of those. And I'd like to say something about the wood choice concept you

mentioned. I have built a few classicals with cypress, and I'm building two right now that have Port Orford cedar bodies (and tops). It's a really marvellous wood and makes a fantastic sounding guitar. I also have some amazing myrtle and cherry, and I want to build with these woods.

I think the bias toward rosewood has got to change, given the eventual scarcity of all of these tropical hardwoods. I played a Neil Ostberg Torres copy that one of my mentors owned and it was made out of cherry, and sounded fantastic, very warm yet at the same time it had a sparkle to the sound.

I'm also using Port Orford for necks, so the emphasis would be on domestic woods for back and sides. Unfortunately the classical guitar community is really married to the tradition of rosewood, and this will change but I think it's going to be ever so slowly.

How about top woods?



I'm really partial to good cedar, red cedar from the northwest and Canada. I have some amazing cedar from the Bull Run watershed area in Oregon-it's light and very stiff and has a lot of colour variation, which I like. I can't stand that uniform, pale cedar, but that's just me.

This wood is old and perfectly quartered, and I brace it with Port Orford, which is itself a marvellous wood. I'm starting to use Port Orford for tops also-I should say that Port Orford has been a favourite wood of mine since I was a boat builder in the early eighties. It's incredibly strong for its weight, works really easily with planes and chisels, has an incredible smell, and is the perfect bracing wood in my opinion. Don't tell anyone though.



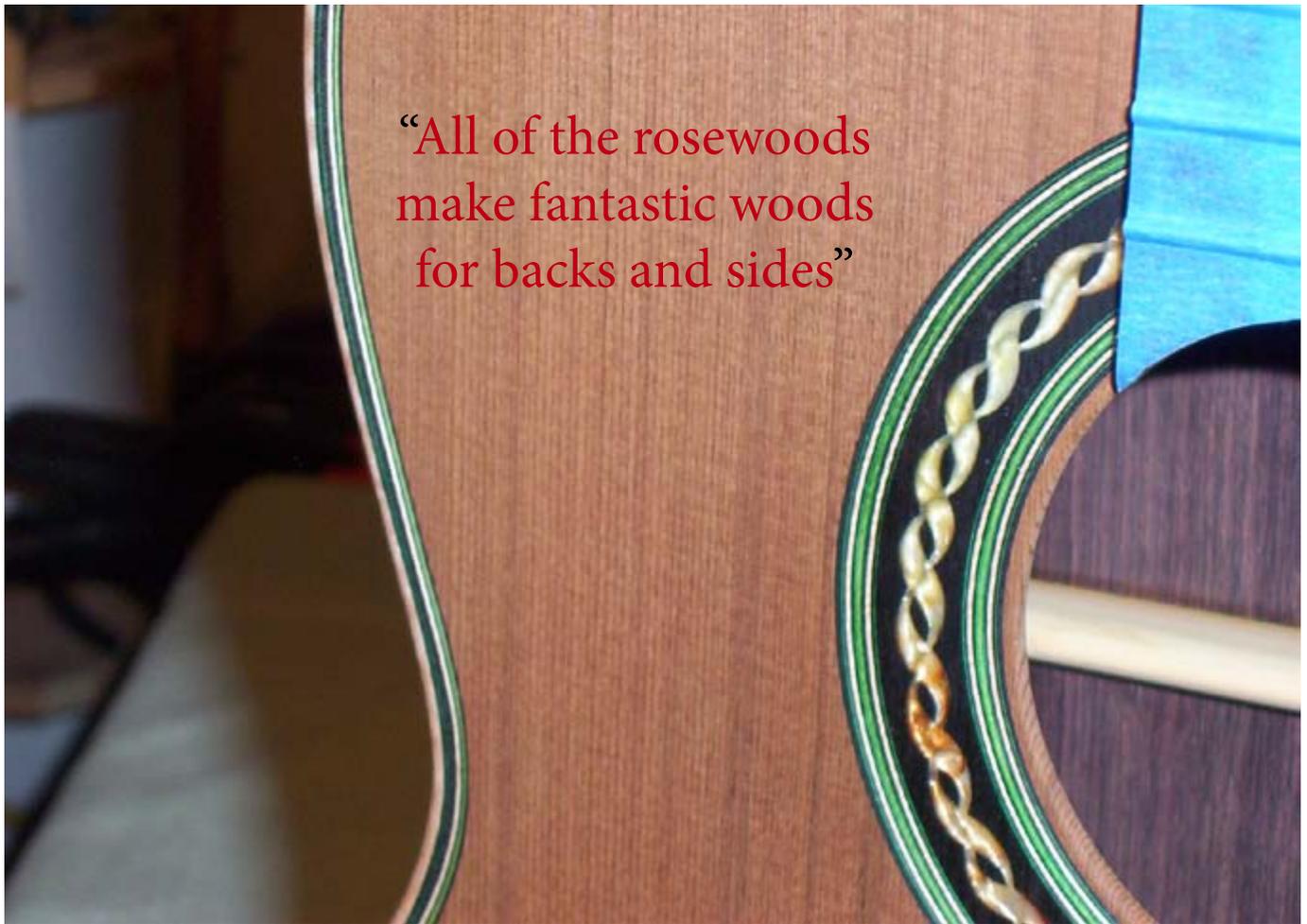
I also like Englemann spruce quite a bit. There is a lot of variation in all of these woods, from tree to tree, but if you get good Englemann I think it is every bit as good as so called 'European' spruce. I recently bought some very beautiful bear claw figure Englemann from Larry Stamm in British Columbia. This spruce makes for a bit more complicated and sophisticated sound than the cedar, but not quite as much punch. A really pure sound though, textured and refined with clear, clean overtones and an uncluttered beauty.

And for necks, are you more mahogany or spanish cedar?



I have used and like both, though for the past ten years or so I've used Spanish cedar almost exclusively. I really like mahogany as I think the extra weight helps the guitar sustain a bit, but I have been moving toward the lightest instrument I can build, so Spanish cedar is great for light and stiff. I am starting to work with Port Orford as I said, and am building two guitars with POC necks. It is at least as good a wood for necks as the other two. It's the wrong color for the traditionalist, so I'll either stain it or use a darker shellac.

Or not...I think the natural color of Port Orford is just beautiful.



“All of the rosewoods make fantastic woods for backs and sides”

But is Port Orford cedar strong and stiff enough for a neck by itself?

Yes, no question about it. Very high strength to weight ratio. I let in a rock maple strip for a bit more stiffness, but I don't think I really need it with POC. It will never catch on in a big way, it's not traditional for classical guitars, or any guitars for that matter. But that doesn't scare me. It's the only wood I use to brace tops, no matter what top wood I'm using. Did I say that already?

Haha yes you did! How about back and sides wood? Classical players have been less adventurous than their steel string counterparts, but from a builder's perspective, what do you think?

Yes, less adventurous. I think builders are not bold enough to buck the tradition, and players are worried about resale value-I mean of course it's more complicated than this, but, simply put, a walnut or maple guitar does not have the popularity that a rosewood one does, warranted or not.

All of the rosewoods make fantastic woods for backs and sides, but a lot of woods have been ignored by the classical guitar community. Woods like walnut, pear, and cherry. There are even some 'exotic' woods that have not caught on, like bubinga and padauk, which are both still plentiful and cheap and very good for classical guitars.

While I have some beautiful Brazilian and a lot of good old Indian rosewood, I would really like to build with some of these woods, and am doing so now. I've got two Port Orford cedar classics going and a koa and bearclaw Englemann spruce guitar. I'm also getting ready to resaw some beautiful, figured cherry that will make wonderful guitars. Yeah, so that's my perspective-many very, very good woods available but a limited market for them.

I'm going to do my part to promote what the classical guitar community calls 'alternative' woods for back and sides, while still making the rosewoods available so that I can pay the mortgage.



Maybe we could talk a little about scale lengths and how they impact on the final sound and playability?

Scale length relative to sound and playability has to be discussed in conjunction with body size (plantilla), body depth, bridge design, top design, etc. Generally speaking if I build a guitar with a longer scale, say 660 mm, I will make the body accordingly larger and deeper, but there is a limit to that or the trebles will start to lose focus.

A long scale guitar is not hard to play per se, in regards to action height. It might be hard to reach some of the stretches in first position, but it should not be hard to fret.

I will occasionally get a request to build a shorter scale guitar, for example 640 mm, which is what I play. This guitar lacks the deep, resonant bass of the larger body/longer scale, but the trade-off is the quick, clear trebles.

“Building classical guitars is a balancing act”

It makes sense that 650 mm is a norm-I can build the body just large and deep enough to have bold and colourful basses and still have bright and clear trebles, while keeping the playability within most people's range.

I'll also vary the design of the linings by adding one or two extra layers, if I want the top to speak more quickly. This would be with a top on a larger body with a longer scale. Building classical guitars is a balancing act, and it's prudent to respect the limits of the design variables.

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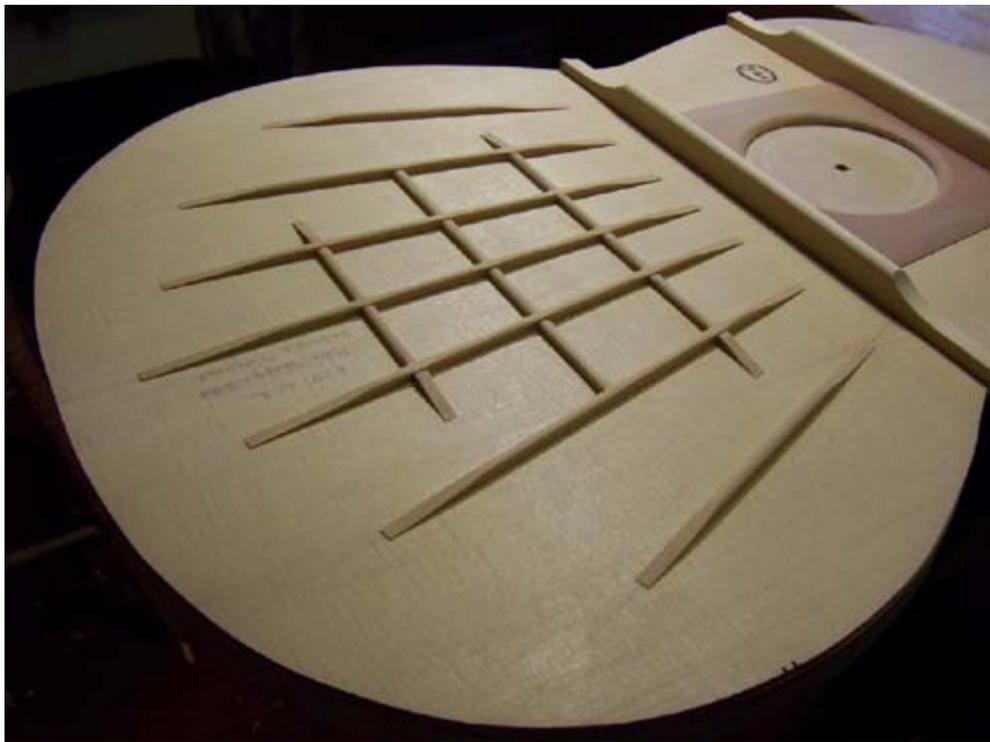
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Could you tell us more about how the linings interact with and affect the top?

Sure. This is a design element that you don't hear too many luthiers talk about, yet it's very useful and versatile when it comes to influencing how the soundboard responds. There are a lot of ways to vary the design of the linings—the first and most obvious one is the type of lining itself; solid, kerfed, or tentallones.

This is pretty much where most makers stop in that they choose a lining style and continue to build with it, not considering how much you can vary the style and use of them. A taller lining will stiffen the sides more, and theoretically stiffening the sides means less energy loss from the top, though it's clearly debatable whether this is desirable or not.

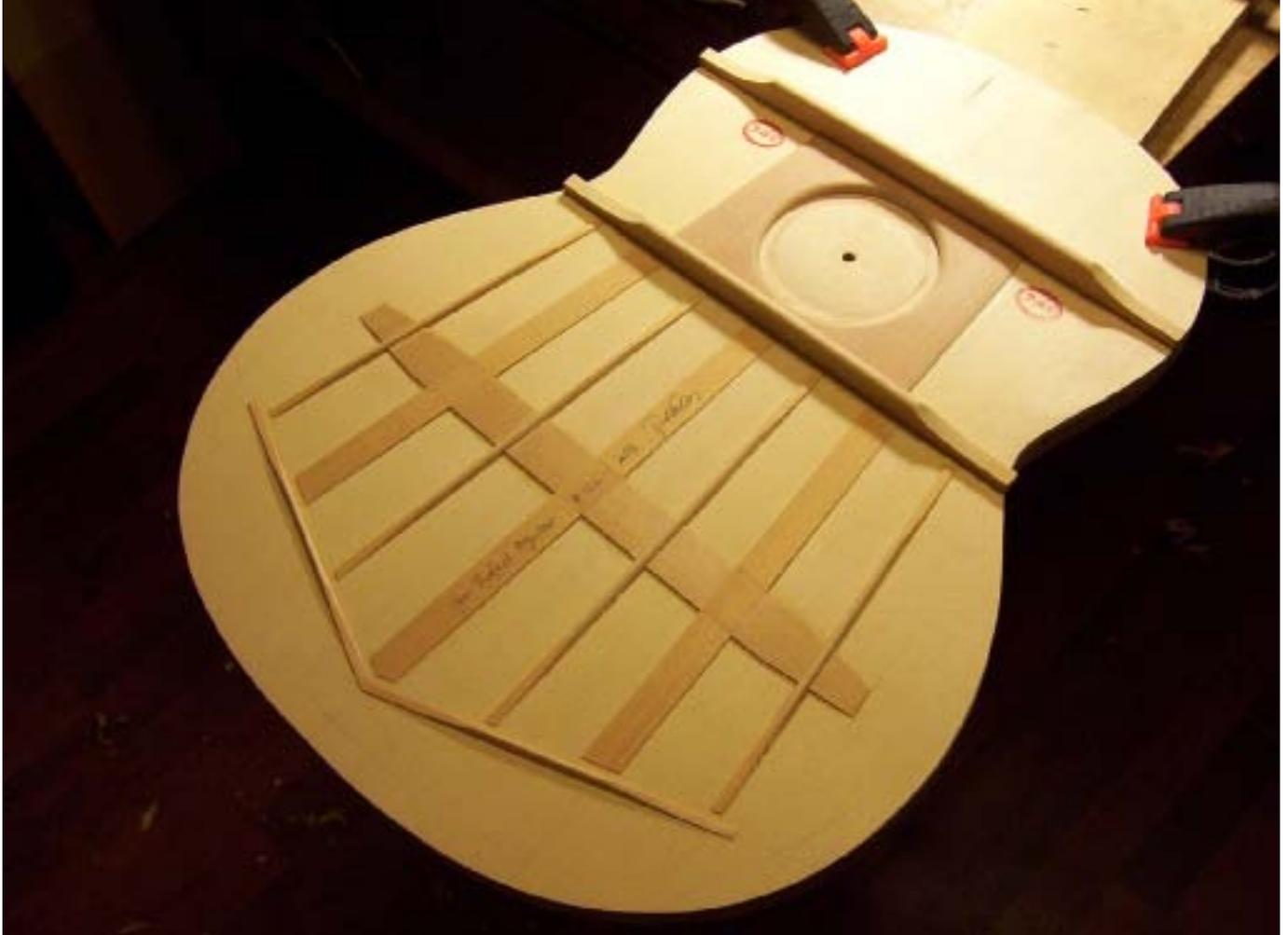
I use solid linings on the top and the back. On the top I quite often double them, meaning I laminate a second set onto the face of the first set, thus making the vibrating part of the top smaller. This seems counter-intuitive; one would think that making the top a little smaller would make the sound smaller, or less efficient, but I have found that in combination with the other design elements of the top, the extra set of linings has a profound effect on the sound.

Just decreasing the area 3.5 mm all the way around the lower bout changes the way the top responds. I feel it make the notes come off the top more quickly. I do this sometimes with a larger body and a bit shorter scale, say 645 mm.

This way the guitar keeps the quality of bass inherent in a larger body, but also has a quick and focused treble. Depending on the top I'm using I'll use the second set of linings in other situations also. I think it has some of the same effect as the cut-off bar in that it's tightening the top some.

This is not new—I did some work recently on a Miguel Rodriguez Sr. and he had a low profile second set of linings on the top. His were Spanish cedar. I'm using poplar right now, but I've used a lot of different woods for this.

Even though it's primary function is to increase the gluing surface for the plates, I feel there is a lot of potential not yet explored for the different approaches to using linings.



How interesting! And the material I take it is also important? Lighter and stiffer is the way to go?

I think that depends on one's goal with this technique-personally I have been pushing my guitars toward the lighter side, in fact the lighter the better as far as I'm concerned. I don't think a denser or heavier material for linings would have any appreciable difference in function, but like many things in guitar making, I can't prove that.

I just know that I really love the sound of a lightly built guitar-it just breathes, and this is something I don't think you get with heavy instruments. There is a quality of sound difference that if you play enough of both you recognize immediately.

How about the more modern innovations like say double tops or sound ports?

I'm not interested in building double tops. I have heard some that sound very good, but it's not the sound that I want. I hear a distinctly different sound from a top that is all wood, and one that is veneer and nomex

The former has a more lush and complex sound-there is more wood to contribute to the sound character. And I think I can build a guitar that is just as loud as a double top. When the sound is clear and organized it is automatically plenty loud, at least my design is.

As for sound ports I have been using them since 1998, and I love them. I recently moved to an elliptical shape, and I keep them relatively small. I think making them too large is a mistake; it bleeds off too much of the 'tension' created with air movement inside the box.

The big holes blast the player in the face with sound and that player has little feeling for what the guitar sounds like out in front. It's an easy trap to fall into-bigger is better. Anyway, I know there is a lot of controversy about them, and the traditionalists will never have holes in the sides of their guitars, but that's fine. Most players are not concert performers and the sound port gives them a larger sound envelope to hear the instrument when they are playing in their living room. I'm convinced they are here to stay.



And about those elevated fingerboards?

I'm not building guitars with elevated fingerboards. I feel like I have the balance of volume of air inside the box relative to the whole design right where I want it, and I would have to change that to raise the fingerboard. In fifteen years of building I have been asked only once if I do an elevated fingerboard. I guess I am sort of traditional that way, but I'm not married to the idea of never doing it. It's probably just a matter of time before I dedicate the time it takes to redesign the shape of the body to accommodate raising the board.

Thank you for that! How do you see the future of classical guitars?

With all of the classical guitar programs at the university and community college level I see no reason why interest in the classical guitar will diminish any time soon. Here in California a lot of programs have been scrapped for budgetary reasons, but a lot of these great young players just move elsewhere to study.

And with all of these very, very good young players, many of whom are still looking for a great instrument, my job is secure. I'm fortunate enough to have some really talented young musicians playing my guitars-just wish they'd hurry up and get famous!

More to the point of the future of the instrument evolving is another topic altogether. Players are 'demanding' more volume, which is a bit of a conundrum. I think a lot of players mistake volume for power, and the sense of volume up close relative to the ability of the instrument to carry out into a large space.

There are plenty of guitars that sound punchy and loud up close, but decay quickly, or don't really convey a sense of the beauty of the instrument, the purity and clarity of sound that moves us emotionally.

So my hope is that more players will come around to the idea that it's not more volume that is required, but a more focused and clear, pure sound, uncluttered, sublime. That sound penetrates and carries.



There will be more innovations-surely the guitar is still evolving. But at some point the simplicity of its origins will win out, at least in my opinion, meaning its basic form and quality of sound will stay the same. Make the body bigger, raise the fingerboard, change the soundhole, put another six holes in the bridge, etc. etc. It all comes back to the beauty of the sound, and that's what us makers, and players, are on a never ending search for.

Thank you for sharing and for taking the time out to speak to us!

You're very welcome, Terence, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk about what I do. As a player and composer I hope to understand clearly what musicians require in terms of sound and playability, and this interview gave me the chance to ponder more concisely just how to articulate my relationship with the classical guitar.

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