



my other life | Shaun Newman

Shaun Newman is director of development at Connexions Cornwall and Devon

After a degree in modern languages, I spent some time teaching English in Germany. When a colleague returning to England could not fit his guitar in his case, I became the proud owner of a guitar. Not having a clue where to start, I was inspired by my record of Villa-Lobos' *Studies*. I sent off for the sheet music and realising I couldn't even read music, let alone play a guitar, I headed for the library and a helpful book.

Fast forward to 20 years later, when I had an accident in which I broke both my legs. I decided to rekindle my interest in guitars while recovering. Having always enjoyed woodwork and made several items of furniture, I was pleased to discover the book, *Make Your Own Classical Guitar* by Stanley Doubtfire – now a classic. I worked through the exercises and really enjoyed it.

A few years later, my wife spotted a local evening class in guitar making taught by David Oddly, a guitar maker based in Exeter. I completed my first guitar during the course and gave it to my daughter. Another two followed and were given to my other daughter and son. But I had no idea if they were any good.

Fortuitously, at a friend's birthday party a member of the band was a classical guitarist. We had musical interests in common and I told him I made guitars and he asked me if he could try one. The trial led to my first commission from him and when he



Guitar Man

took the guitar that I had made to various concerts across the South-West, more commissions began to roll in.

Making guitars is a slow process; each takes between 200 to 300 hours. For a classical guitar, I use Brazilian or Indian rosewood for the back and sides, spruce for the top, Cuban mahogany or cedar for the head and neck, ebony for the fingerboard and maple, spruce and ebony for the inlays. Flamenco guitars (I have made two) use cypress wood mainly for the back and sides with a cedar top. I have also made lutes, dulcimers and a medieval fiddle!

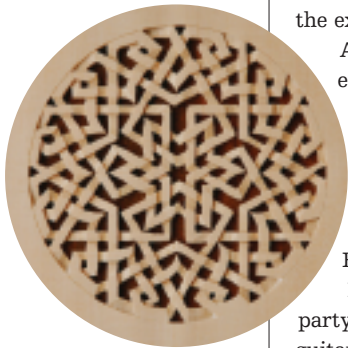
The different woods determine the sound of the finished instrument – long sustainable notes are best from rosewood and spruce instruments, whereas cedar and cypress give a shorter, punchier sound. I also carry out repairs and have recently restored a beautiful nineteenth-century French guitar and also a lute, which once belonged to Paul Montague, one-time lover of Virginia Woolf and member of the Bloomsbury set. I get an awful

lot out of these projects as often the people who give them to me never expected to see their instrument in such a good condition ever again!

I am currently making my twenty-first guitar with a beautiful mother of pearl inlay. Its potential purchaser is a young player who wants a quality guitar to use when he goes off to music school. This is a strong market for me and one I hope to pursue further in September when I retire from full-time work in careers and move into instrument making.

I still play the guitar and have recorded three CDs, with collections of short pieces for the classical guitar, including work by Schubert. But the best thing about making guitars is listening to one you created being played by a great musician in a concert hall with an captivated audience. ●

shaunnewmanguitars.co.uk



Interview by
Helen Stokes

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