

NEWMAN ZEBRA

An exotic looking nylon-strung classical from a new professional luthier. Steve Gordon finds out if this sounds as good as it looks.



Living in Devon has many advantages – not just the climate and environment – and from a guitarist's point of view, one of these is the sheer number of fine luthiers we have living and working here. Adding to the swelling ranks now is recently turned professional luthier Shaun Newman. Shaun began making guitars some 15 years ago, and while concentrating on classical guitars, he also makes harps (renaissance and Celtic), mandolins, hammered and mountain dulcimers, lutes and fiddles.

Build and Features

The 'Zebra guitar' is an excellent example of Shaun's work. Indian or Brazilian rosewood is the traditional material used for the back and sides of classical guitars, but there is no reason why any dense hardwood could not be used, and in this case Shaun has taken the bold step of using zebrawood (zebrano), giving the instrument a distinctive striking visual aesthetic. The soundboard is of master-grade Engelmann spruce, the neck of Spanish cedar topped with an ebony fingerboard. The nut width is 52 mm (62 mm at the 12th fret), with a scale length of 654 mm topped off with Van Gent brass/ivoroid tuners. The body dimensions are 368 mm at the lower bout and

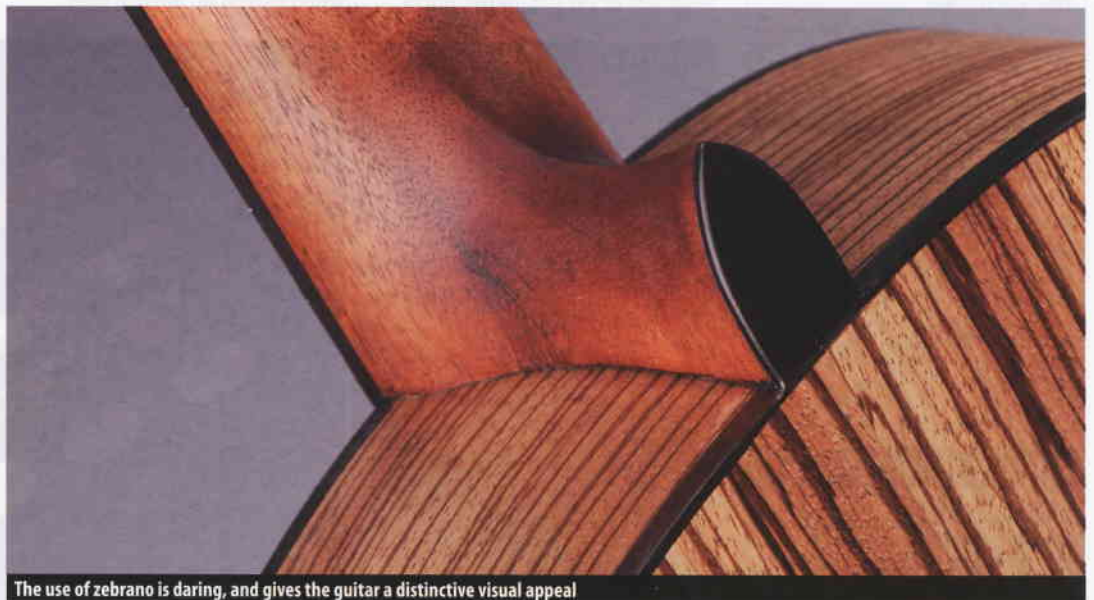
285 mm at the upper, while the depth is 94 mm at the heel and 102 mm at the tail. The strings are slightly offset to allow space for correctly executed ligados on the top string.

The instrument is beautifully finished in hand-applied oil, giving it a natural matt look and feel, but more importantly allowing the wood to move and breathe freely. Shaun has opted to use the 'two holes per string' system in the bridge. More and more luthiers are opting for this double-hole system as opposed to the single hole drilled horizontally through

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the bridge. The advantage is that a steeper and constant angle can be achieved at the point through which the string passes down from the saddle to the bridge piece. This gives greater torque between the bridge and soundboard, at the

same time simplifying the whole tying process of the string, making it constant, neater and with a cleaner connection between the string and wood. The greater torque, so the argument goes, allows for more energy to be



The use of zebrawood is daring, and gives the guitar a distinctive visual appeal

NEWMAN
Zebra

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Technical specification

Manufacturer: Shaun Newman
Model: Concert Classical
Retail Price: £2,750
Made In: Crediton, Devon
Top: Engelmann Spruce, master grade.
Back and Sides: Zebrano, a.k.a. 'zebrawood'
Neck: Spanish cedar
Fingerboard: Master grade African ebony
Frets: Nickel silver classical, medium gauge
Tuners: Van Gent, brass/ivoroid
Nut Width: 52mm
Scale Length: 654mm
Onboard Electronics: None
Strings Fitted: D'Addario Pro Arte normal tension
Left Handers: Not this particular example
Gig Bag/Case Included: Hard case included

Contact details

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What we think

Pros: Excellent build quality, huge volume
Cons: None really, but you've got to like zebrawood!
Overall: This is a quality instrument and, at £2,750, a fairly modest price in the world of hand-built classical guitars

Our Ratings Explained

5 Stars: Superb, Almost faultless
4 Stars: Excellent, Hard to beat
3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well
2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor

Rating out of five

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

transmitted to the soundboard, resulting in more resonance and volume.

Sounds

I think the contemporary tradition of classical guitar construction tends to fall very broadly into three camps: the 'smaller-bodied and fine-boned' spruce-top instruments favoured by many English luthiers, in which the focus is on a refined treble tone; the more robust spruce or cedar top favoured by some Spanish luthiers; and those the experimentalists – those luthiers experimenting with lattice soundboard supports, double tops, floating fingerboards etc etc. Some of the instruments in the first group tend to have a 'neutral' tone, allowing the player to imprint his or her personality into the instrument, while instruments in the second and third groups tend to play themselves, with the guitarist just about in charge.

Shaun's Zebra guitar falls into the second category. This is without doubt the loudest guitar I have ever played, while at the same time maintaining a sophisticated and complex tone. The core sound is powerful and steely but with slightly dark overtones. This is not a guitar for the faint-hearted. Although of fairly standard dimensions, it has a robustness and masculine sensibility that takes a certain degree of strength to get the strings moving, but the guitar responds magnificently at all levels, especially in the higher register. The balance between bass and treble is good, especially the mid-range bass strings, which have a ringing bell-like clarity. The sonic decay on the higher notes



(10th fret upwards) is even – a little short at the 12th fret but this will play in – and a chromatic scale on the top string from the 10th to the 17th fret produces a constant volume and clarity that has to be heard to be believed.

Conclusion

The trick with new spruce-top classical guitars is to try and anticipate how they will sound when played in. Spruce tops

generally take longer than cedar to play in, and in some cases it can be months or longer before the instrument peaks. What generally happens is that sonic spikes are ironed out, the balance between bass and treble develops, and the tone becomes more complex and mellow. The assets this guitar starts with can only ensure it gets even better in the months to come.

Steve Gordon



The zebrawood could be too much for some



The headstock design is striking and exquisitely finished

