

THE WORKSHOP

THE FIND OF A LIFETIME

- restoring a 100 year-old vintage Salvador Ibanez.



The restored Ibanez. Image courtesy of Apex News.

I have heard several musical instrument makers say that repair work gets in the way of the real business of making. Well, that is often true. When I get my third 'Tatra Classic' in over the course of a month, with a warped neck and seized machine heads, I sometimes feel that way.

But just once in half a lifetime for a maker, and perhaps a whole lifetime for the finder, something comes to the workshop that is truly special. I believe this to be the case with the Salvador Ibanez that was brought to me, having been found on a council recycling tip in Exmouth, Devon. The person who found it, a guitarist called Micah Carleson, saw the headstock peeping out from a battered guitar case and knew immediately that it was

worth a look. He asked how much the tip supervisor wanted for it, and they settled on just five pounds.

It was only when he got home and had a proper look inside the case that Micah began to see just what he had discovered. He called me and asked if he could bring it to my workshop. At first I thought: "Here comes another Tatra Classic..." but instead it was a truly top end Salvador Ibanez salon guitar made between 1898 and 1906. I will return later to how it could be so accurately dated.

Despite the layers of dirt and the generally poor condition of the instrument it could clearly be seen that this was something out of the ordinary. The back and sides are of rosewood, possibly Brazilian, though it

is hard to tell. The top is of spruce, made up from three pieces which was common practice then, and the neck is cedar. The tuning machines were so dirty that it was difficult to see just what they were made of, but it turned out that they are of brass. This further indicated that this Ibanez was of superior quality as brass machines were only fitted to the best instruments. And then of course there were the beautiful inlays in the soundhole rosette and the finely crafted slant-check purflings. All of these factors added up to a really worthwhile project, which was to bring this elegant, old masterpiece back to life.

Salvador Ibanez (1854-1920) was an extraordinary guitar maker. He began life



The side of the Ibanez suffered the most amount of damage

in the trade at the age of 11 when he was apprenticed to a maker in Calle Muela, Valencia, but by the age of just 16 he set up his own company. This was in 1870. By this time he was able to make mandolins, lutes, bandurrias and ukuleles as well as fine quality guitars. Indeed by 1897 he had made the world's first double-necked guitar following a recital where he saw a player having to switch between instruments to play in different styles. Whatever he made, his instruments were considered the finest of their age, and this combined with a ruthless approach to business made him the largest manufacturer of guitars in all of Spain by the time of his death in 1920. His instruments were more ornate than the traditional schools of Madrid and even Barcelona, and this combined with their warm sound attracted the attention of many players.

It was during the years 1898 to 1906 that Salvador Ibanez occupied workshops in Calle Baja San Francisco, Valencia. The label inside the guitar that was brought to me for restoration had this address. Later the workshop moved to Calle Padre Rico, and the label changed to 'Salvador Ibanez e Hijos'. That label was in use between 1915 and 1920, but sadly the workshops were totally destroyed during the Spanish Civil War and Salvador's two sons who had been managing the business since his death were killed, as



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were most of the personnel.

Despite this devastating chain of events, the name 'Salvador Ibanez' did not die. In 1935 the Hoshino Gakki Company (formerly a sheet music producer and distributor) bought the rights to Salvador Ibanez guitars. The company was based in Nagoya Japan, and had been importing these guitars since around 1929. From 1935 onwards Hoshino Gakki began to make 'Spanish' acoustic guitars under the name 'Ibanez Salvador'. This name was later shortened simply to 'Ibanez', a

brand that of course, remains to this day.

Over time Hoshino Gakki moved into steel string acoustic and electric guitars. They developed their own designs, but also made copies of big brand guitars such as Fender, Rickenbaker and Gibson. They opened a distribution centre in Philadelphia and took the American and then the European markets by storm. But the era of making copies was to end when the parent company of Gibson sued Hoshino Gakki because of a copied headstock design, a lawsuit that was



The top, before the restoration

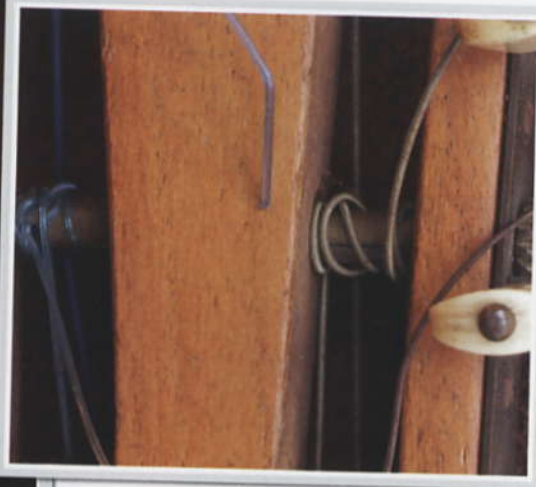
to result in an out of court settlement and no further copies. However, Hoshino Gakki had produced its own designs and cleverly collaborated with top players such as Steve Vai, Joe Satriani and Paul Gilbert to launch very successful models.

Meanwhile back in my workshop in Crediton, Devon, I had to work out what the best way forward might be. I suggested to the owner that I should remove the back to ensure very strong repairs from the inside, but he was unsure about how safe 'open heart surgery' would be. His instincts were probably right, as when I have removed the backs of old guitars in the past an inherent instability tends to follow. So we decided on a light touch restoration, observing the old adage 'the minimum necessary is the maximum permissible'.

The first task was to remove the old strings

which had virtually locked themselves into place through age, and to take off the machine heads. I discovered the French origin of the machines mentioned earlier through barely visible stamping on the back of the baseplates indicating a firm of machine makers with a factory in Paris during the last half of the 19th century. The rollers are of brass, and the buttons camel bone. It seems that camel bone was often used in furniture making as well as musical instrument making at the time. The fine black striations indicate this, and the lack of 'grain' shows that they are neither ivory nor ordinary bone. The heads cleaned up well with a fine steel brush and brass polish, and once done, showed off their etching. A simple but attractive pattern found on many salon guitar tuners of the period.

The next major task was to stabilise the



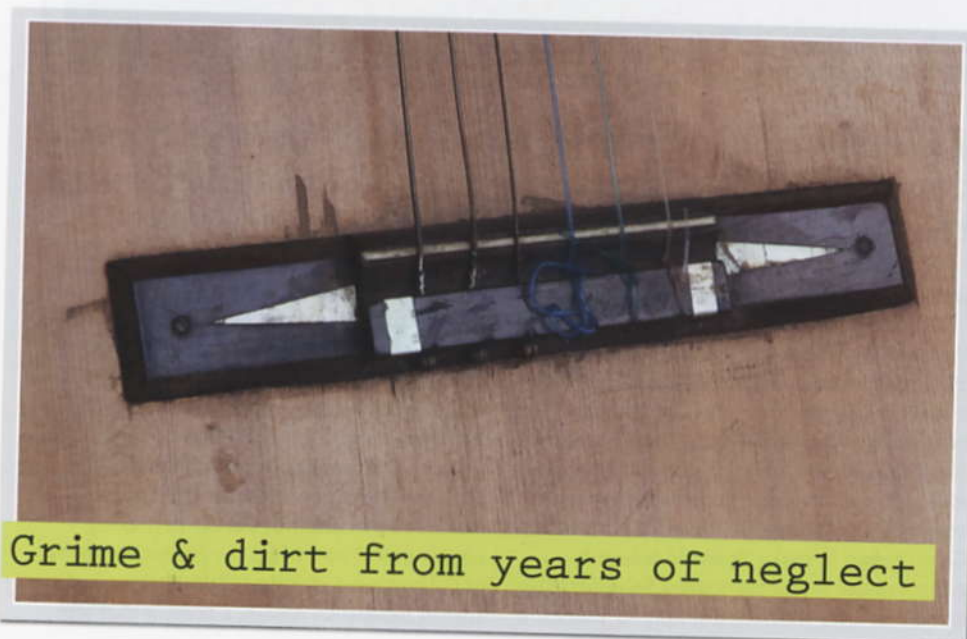
back and sides of the instrument. Unusually the front had remained intact, and although even in the photographs of the finished restoration there appear to be cracks running alongside the lower part of the fingerboard into the lower bout, these are simply joins in the three-piece top. The back had around 9 cracks in it, and one of the sides had a gaping split that ran almost the full length of both the upper and lower bouts. This had to be glued from the outside and patched from the inside to give the repair sufficient strength. Luckily I was working with rosewood which responds well to a mixture of rosewood dust mixed with ethyl cyanoacrylate glue (superglue) well and was rubbed into any cracks and hardened with accelerator.

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Repairing all of the cracks took several hours, but as soon as that stage was reached the body of the instrument was sufficiently robust to withstand a complete strip back to the original wood ready for a re-finish with traditional oil.

The headstock and neck were similarly stripped, and the frets polished back to their original brass lustre. Luckily the frets were in a playable state, and did not need levelling, nor did any need replacing. However, as is common in very old guitars, the neck and fingerboard had shrunk slightly over the years, and therefore each fret had to be trimmed back flush at either end to make playing comfortable.

Once down to the bare wood all over I could use the Liberon finishing oil, which after 15 or so coats was ready for polishing.



Grime & dirt from years of neglect



You can see the damage to the lower bout, above.

Ibanez in all its glory, right.

The last few coats of oil were put on with 0000 grade steel wool and the final three with 2500 grade wet and dry paper. Such a finish does not interfere with the original patina of the guitar, yet enhances the beauty of the wood just enough.

Once the machine heads were lubricated and renovated the strings could go on. I used Pro-Arte light gauge classical strings which are admirably suited to a nineteenth century salon guitar. Then came that special moment where fresh life is breathed into a long dormant soul. The first thing that struck me was the brightness of the instrument. The smaller body proportions, and shallowness of the sound chamber will have accounted for this, as well perhaps as the tightness of the spruce top which will have pulled itself in over the hundred years or more since it was made. And then, each time you put the instrument down and you look at it face on you can appreciate the beautiful craft. The mother of pearl flechettes in the rosette meet in perfect symmetry - a true work of art. What a privilege to be able to play a role in the history of this magnificent little guitar.

I have been asked several times since undertaking this restoration what value I would place on the instrument. This is always a difficult question, as it could depend on many factors - an auction or a private sale, a collector or a student, an aficionado or a punter? Having said that, a similar instrument appeared recently on an Internet auction site and it was in far worse condition, and had not been restored. The asking price was over four thousand euros...
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Words Shaun Newman. Photography by Andrew McNinch.

