



Right
Shaun Newman
with some of his
completed guitars

Opposite top
Forming the sides
of the sound box
in a mould

Opposite bottom
Small wooden
struts –
tentellones – give
the structure
strength



In Search of Harmony

When he broke both legs in an accident, Shaun Newman's life took on a whole new direction

Shaun Newman retired from his demanding director's job last autumn to concentrate on making quality guitars by hand. His hobby is now his career. Shaun was in his twenties before he learned to play the guitar. After taking a degree in German, he taught English in Germany, where a colleague gave him his guitar. Not one to miss an opportunity, Shaun taught himself, piecing together the music of Villa

Lobos note by note with hand-made drawings of the fingerboard.

The cares of the world took over and Shaun didn't play his guitar for many years. Then he broke both legs in an accident. With time on his hands and forced to give up sport, he turned to playing the guitar in earnest. Being a practical man, he thought of making guitars with the aid of *Make Your Own Classical Guitar* by Stanley Doubtfire. However, the task was beyond him until he joined a local class in guitar-

making run by David Oddy.

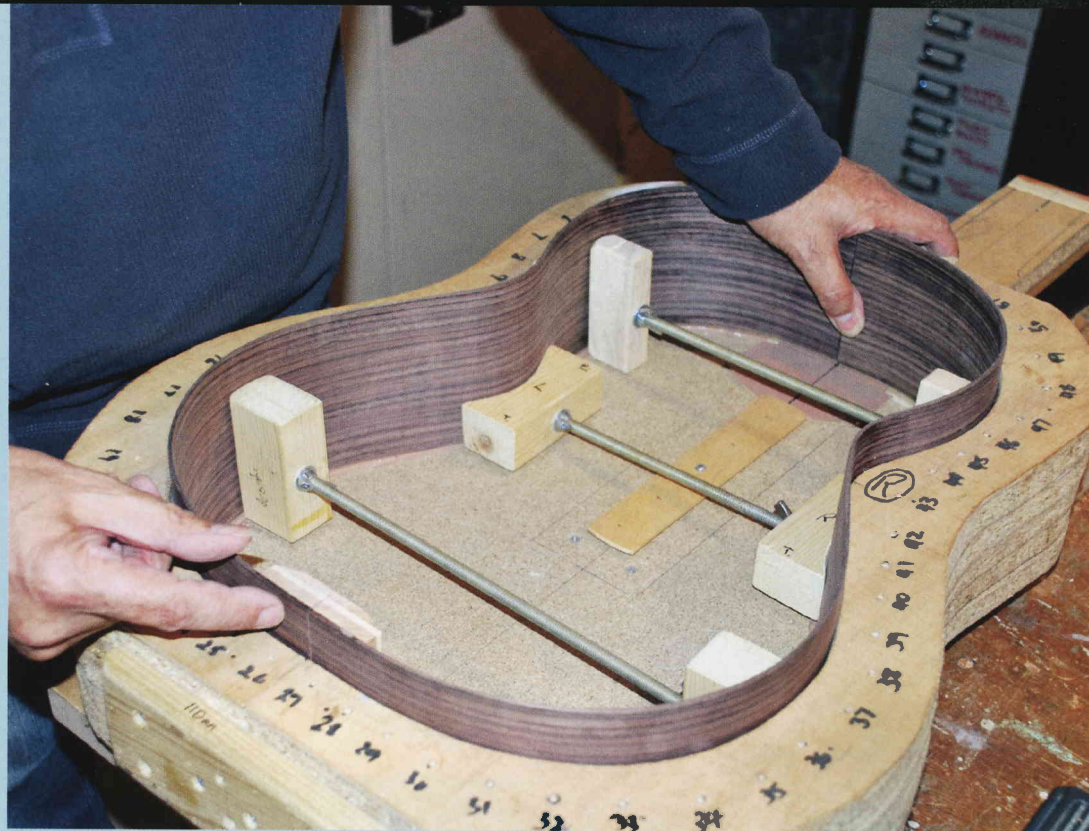
"It was a real breakthrough," explained Shaun. "David's a master craftsman. We got on brilliantly and I started making my own guitars. There is something about the sound of the Spanish guitar, its subtlety of tone and quality of sound, which grabbed me from an early age and has arrested me ever since. It is second to none, an enduring passion.

"I could have carried on with a director's salary for another five years, but you can leave things too late. Now I'm 60 I know I can be a guitar-maker when I grow up! Seriously, I want to make guitars for at least another ten years. It adds another dimension to my entire life and I gain immense satisfaction from seeing the fruits of my labours.

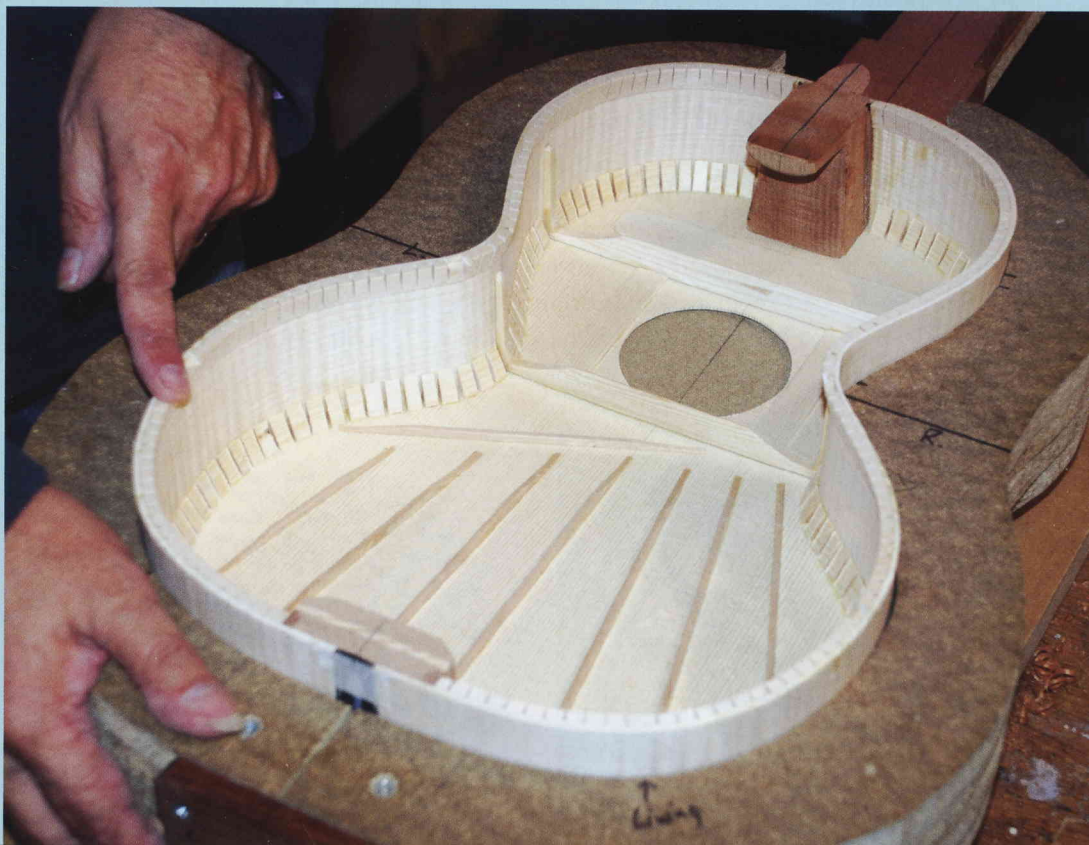
"I've been making guitars evenings and weekends for 12 years, sometimes getting up at five in the morning. It's been absolutely wonderful since I retired to have time to think everything through without pressure. Making by hand you have choices throughout the process. Every instrument is individual. The subtlety of tone you get is unparalleled. You'll never get this with a factory-made instrument, although some of those are very good."

Unlike factory-made guitars, Shaun's guitars are tailor-made to his customers' requirements and this is partly reflected in the time taken to make an instrument – 300 hours being nothing exceptional. For example, fingerboards and frets can be made larger or smaller to suit individual hands, making play more comfortable and reducing stress. Similarly, string length can be adjusted and inlays chosen.

The first stage in making a guitar



*"Now I'm 60, I know I can be a guitar-maker when I grow up!
Seriously, I gain immense satisfaction seeing the fruits of my labour"*





Above and opposite top
Shaun adds hand-made inlay work to enhance the front

Below left and opposite bottom right
The headstock is frequently inlaid with mother-of-pearl

Below right
An intricate design based on a 16th-century Austrian design decorates the sound box of a lute

is choosing the woods. Harmonising the materials is one of the key points in making an instrument, bringing sound and appearance into harmony. Maple, ebony, cedar, rosewood, mahogany and walnut are among the beautiful woods Shaun uses for the necks, backs and sides of the instruments. These contrast with the lighter wood on the guitar's front.

Although he has recently used cedar for a guitar front, Shaun usually favours Engelmann spruce. Cut from Alaskan trees more than 1,000 years old it has remarkably

dense, straight grain, giving an ideal combination of strength and resonance.

Shaun explained the guitar-making process in his workshop, the basement of his roomy Victorian home in Crediton, where the walls are lined with rows of neatly sorted joiner's tools. These were collected over the years when he made furniture, the pastime which gave him an indispensable knowledge of woods and how to work with them. His joiner's tools are complemented by a wide variety of specialist tools. Some of them are hand-made,

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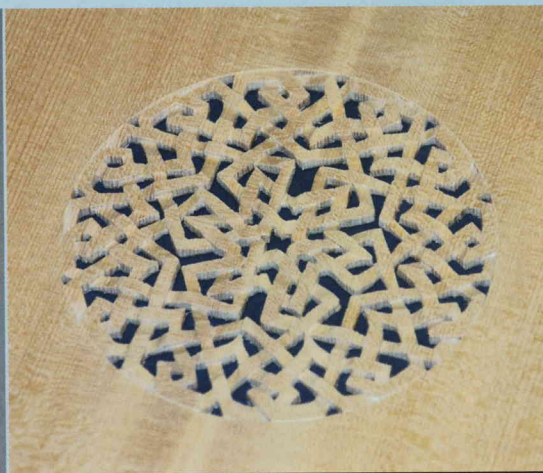
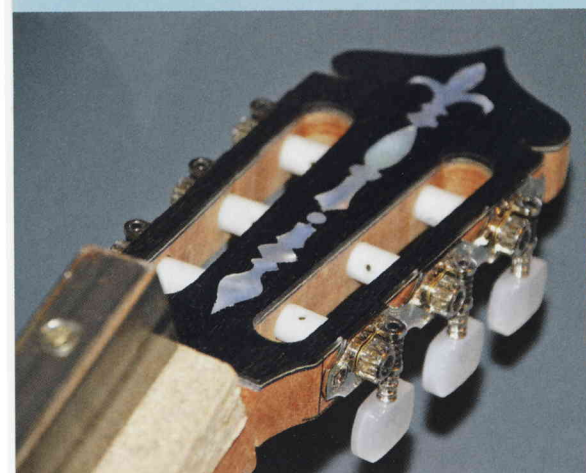
others highly specialised, such as a violin-maker's scalpel and set of tiny thumb planes.

Having settled on materials, Shaun begins by cutting and shaping the front of the guitar in two matching halves, joined in a jig by the 'wedge and lace' method. He reduces the front to only 2.5mm on the treble side, tapering to 2mm on the bass, checked with an engineer's gauge. That contrast of thickness, enhancing both bass and treble notes, is one of the features that distinguishes hand-made from factory-made guitars.

After he's carved the head and neck of the guitar, Shaun joints them together, ensuring everything is perfectly matched to the centre line. Next, he bends the sides on a hot iron to fit the mould, which keeps the naturally springy wood in shape. He has five different moulds for different types of guitar, plus another for lutes.

The guitar front is fan-braced and strengthened with tiny wooden wedges, and the instrument becomes really three-dimensional when the back is added. Hand-made inlay work, made of wafer-thin slices of various coloured veneers sandwiched together in patterns, are added to enhance the back and front.

Then comes the headstock – Shaun has his own signature design – which may be decorated with inlay too, perhaps with mother-of-pearl, to complement the machine head. Frets and bridges





Above
Fitting the back

are made and fitted and then finished by hand. He applies up to 60 coats of lacquer, which are rubbed down, polished and burnished.

The final result is a beautiful guitar, but Shaun is adamant that what really counts is the quality of sound it makes. Professional guitarist David Cottam is happy to endorse Shaun's guitars – he owns two, one of which is his all-time favourite.

"Although factory-made guitars can be consistently good, they are never exceptional or distinctively different," said David, who called during the interview. "Newman guitars have character, a big range of responses. They give a focused, well-balanced sound, warm and rich. You can buy loud guitars, but Shaun's have a clean, distinct sound which projects well when you're playing to an audience. Although they have powerful bass notes, the treble sound they produce is strong enough to handle that."

David picked up his guitar and played, justifying everything he'd just said. We induced Shaun to play

one of his own instruments too. Although Shaun is very modest about his playing, seeing himself as primarily a maker of guitars, he has a large repertoire of classical and folk music literally at his fingertips, some of which he has collected on his CD. Is it, I wondered, the music itself that drives him or the craft of making?

"I ask myself whether it is the process or the finished product. Why is it I can't wait to make my next guitar, even before I've finished the last one? On reflection, it's half and half, but hearing my guitars played really well is the most satisfying thing about the whole business." □

ROBERT HESKETH

For more information contact Shaun on ☎01363 774416, www.shaunnewmanguitars.co.uk.

For an introductory book, Shaun recommends *Making Master Guitars* by Roy Courtnall (Robert Hale, 1993).

PHOTO: ROBERT HESKETH



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