

Sound and vision

SOME OF THE WORLD'S FINEST GUITARS ARE CREATED IN A SMALL SOUTH DEVON STUDIO

*f*or someone with a background in two dimensions, Simon Ambridge seems well attuned to working in three. The Devon guitar maker originally studied graphic design, and then worked in illustration and photography in London before setting up as a furniture maker. He built his first guitar in 1978, but it was a decade before he could devote himself to the luthier's craft full-time. Today his Dartington studio serves customers from as far afield as Japan and the US, and his order book stretches well into the future.

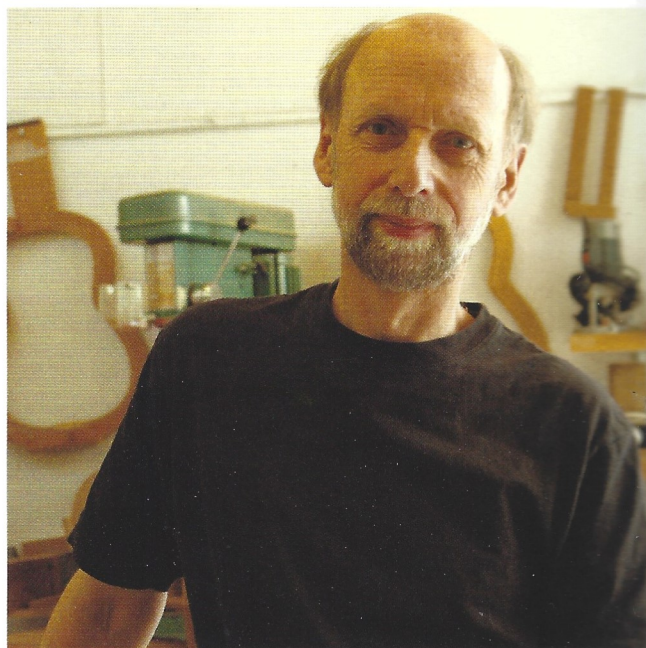
While the three-dimensional form is vital – a classical guitar may be technologically advanced or structurally innovative, but it must still look like a classical guitar – it is perhaps the fourth that is most important. That is the sound it makes. "I'm aiming for a focused sound," the 58-year-old craftsman says. "A bell-like treble and a deep, dark bass, with a penetrating quality."

There can be few challenges for the craftsman more technically demanding, or more open to subjective interpretation, than hand-building a wooden instrument to be as easy on the ear as it is on the eye. Ambridge's first guitar was a solid-body electric, and he still plays a steel-string acoustic that he made for himself, but he was inspired to build classical guitars after hearing Julian Bream. "Getting the sound quality seemed more challenging," he recalls. "Nylon strings ask more from the instrument – they are more subtle, with less tension."

The physics of guitar construction is complex. The structure must be rigid, but also pliable. It needs a light soundboard, or top, which vibrates to create the sound. But the guitar must also have mass, concentrated under the bridge, where the strings are secured. "It's a balance of these forces that you're trying to achieve," says Ambridge.

Selection of materials is as important as the way the guitar is put together. Spruce is the usual choice for the soundboard. "It has high strength-to-weight, which is good for vibration. But it needs to be played for five years before it's at its best," Ambridge explains. Other materials can be chosen as much for their aesthetic as their tonal qualities. He often uses maple. One of the two instruments now being finished off in his small, sunlit workshop has a back and sides of dark Indian rosewood, which is as attractive as it is dense.

"Brazilian rosewood is sometimes preferred for its grain, but it's a restricted species now," says Ambridge. "Many players still want it, even though they know it is difficult to obtain." He does have a few pieces stashed away, however – some dating from before 1914 – for a few very special guitars, which will be priced to reflect their



rarity. Ebony is favoured for the fretboard, on a neck of either cedar or South American mahogany. Ivory is traditionally used for the saddle, but it has been banned for a long time. Ambridge has used fossil mammoth ivory – "it's surprisingly obtainable," he says – but he usually uses camel bone, sourced from a Scottish importer. It's quite a shopping list, and quite a list of shops. "It's not like going down to Travis Perkins," he laughs.

While he is happy to build one-off instruments, most Simon Ambridge guitars are from his range of standard models. The Series 40 concert guitar is based on the 40th guitar he built – the 42 is slightly smaller. His Torres model was inspired by an 1887 instrument from the great Spanish maker. The widely-praised Hauser is modelled on a 1940 example from Hermann Hauser, which Ambridge had the opportunity to study in great depth last year – a guitar, he noted, which "represents a kind of perfection of the luthier's craft". The Panormo model is based on an early 19th century design.

Apart from frets and tuning mechanisms, everything is painstakingly hand crafted. Just French-polishing a completed guitar takes days. Fine inlays around the body and in the central rosette are created by building up laminates of coloured veneers, slicing them end-on and offsetting the sections to create the design. It's the most time-consuming process, but it results in a miniature mosaic masterpiece, with 'tiles' half a millimetre square.

Simon Ambridge builds about ten instruments a year, two at a time. Each one is supposed to represent 160 hours of work. In reality, it's many more than that. "In theory I should be doing twelve guitars a year, but I've never managed it yet," he smiles ruefully.

It's the curse of the perfectionist – but perfection is the point.

www.ambridgeguitars.co.uk

