

The Luthier



In the world of classical guitar music, most of the attention is directed towards the composers of the music and their interpreters, the guitarists themselves. There is, however, a third man in this game which is at least equally important to bring guitar music to the world: the guitar maker, or more stylishly, the luthier.

I played "products" (eh... sounds a bit abstract, I admit) from various luthiers in the last thirty-five years of my (;-) well. let's call it) playing career. When I started, I was hardly aware of the man/woman behind the guitar.

Just a little *Caveat* to consider during reading these stories. These are my personal experiences, so they are quite subjective. Please do not read them as reviews, because they are not. It's more like a story of all guitars I came across as a player up till now.

So, click the names of the luthiers in the menu to find out more.

Anonymous 1

I started my hobby of playing the guitar on an instrument which I bought for ten guilders (about 4 Euros) from one of the boy friends of my oldest sister. I have to admit that even ten guilders was too well payed. The guitar was a typical *Modelo Banana Box* which you can buy

as a souvenir on every Spanish street corner. An example of Luthier Unknown, the label inside was completely missing. Considering the finish, I guess that this guy glued together at least ten guitars a day from prefab parts.

I decided to customize this axe. I bought fresh tuning machines, new strings, a new head-and saddle nut and two yards of fret wire. Without any knowledge of guitar building I removed the old parts, painted the body and fretboard, refitted the new parts and finally hammered the frets into the fretboard with some effort. After a lot of sanding and filing the guitar was more or less ready to play for the first steps towards musicianship. For quite a lot less than a guitar from the shop, ehh... not considering the price of the new parts!

After a while some doubts started to rise... The guitar did not sound that well and if you were bad lucky, you teared your hands on the not perfectly smoothed frets. At that time, it became clear to me that it required quite some skill to repair a guitar, let alone build one. So, I tied a rope to the head, nailed it up to the wall and started an odyssey for a better guitar.

Anonymous 2

Anyone can tell you that a better guitar costs good money. In those days, the price of a Yamaha classical guitar, the workhorse of many a classical guitar student, was 175 guilders (about 75 Euros). Quite an amount of money for a Grammar School student with a small newspaper round only. Other guitars which were much better according to the salespeople had a much higher price as well. Many times, I have been sighing in front of the shop window of Sacksioni's Music Shop in the Ruysdaelstraat in Amsterdam, but this did not help getting my wallet fatter.

In the first year of my university study, my side-line yielded sufficient money to have something left after subtraction of fixed costs like insurance, tuition and books. I spent this money to buy a guitar at Hampe's Music Shop which was located at the Spui in Amsterdam.

The guitar actually had a brand, its label inside showed a minstrel who was playing the lute and a kind of autograph which also showed the production date. The label proudly stated *Guitarra Artesiana*. That looked like Spanish! A hundred and twenty guilders (50 Euros) only, that's a bargain, isn't it?

Apparently the -again- anonymous luthier lacked confidence in the playing volume of his guitars, specifically the bass strings. To my surprise the low E, A and D were strung with metal strings. Consequently, the first purchase besides the guitar became a set of nylon strings, because steel strings are not done on a classical guitar.

This guitar was a tremendous improvement with reference to my *Modelo Banana Box*. On this instrument, I started my guitar lessons and went through stage fright for the first times. This was the guitar of my college days. At this moment, I do not possess it any more, it has served in different college days -those of my cousin Bart to be precise- and it was quite demolished in the progress. Repair is not cost effective any more.

Helmut Hanika

During my college days, I met the girl who would become my wife. She played a significant role in my guitaristic development. It was not because she asked me to play some on the guitar already at her first visit (which I complied, almost trembling for nerves, because refusing to play would be a let-down). Despite my at that time poor performance she saw the greater perspective and encouraged me to play (and purchase) instruments who would help me progress.

When I graduated, she gave me a new guitar in a case. It was quite a search in the local music shop, but in the end, I made a choice, a guitar with a spruce top which was quite expensive according to my then standards, with 750 guilders (340 Euros) it was one of the more expensive guitars in the shop.

In this case, the luthier was known: the guitar originated from the workshop of Helmut Hanika. Rumours stated that he worked in communistic Eastern Germany in those days: my guitar was built in 1978. He started his guitar workshop in 1953, and now his son Armin is leading the company.

The Hanika was a nice and friendly guitar with a powerful feedback, as the player you could actually hear (and enjoy) what you were doing. At a certain moment, I found out that its action was too high (I did not notice it before I had recovered from an elbow injury, the dreaded tennis elbow). The guitar work shop of Wagenvoort in Hengelo had the right solution for this problem: a bit of filing the saddle nut to minimum height.

Manuel Contreras

I played the Hanika for a few years with a lot of pleasure. At a certain time, however, on my guitar lessons I found the living room of my guitar teacher's home full of guitar cases. How come? Well, some retired guitar teacher wanted to give his complete set of instruments to acquaintances of my teacher, just to sell them on the flea market. The guy wanted to clear his attic and showed up with some remarkable guitars from the seventies. I saw a Contreras in two sizes (full and half) and an acoustic bass guitar.

Doubtlessly the organisers of the flea market would have sold these guitars for next to nothing if none of them would have gotten the idea to inquire with my guitar teacher after the value of the instruments. He was very surprised (Contreras has quite a name in guitar building) and offered to sell the instruments for realistic prices. His acquaintances were quite lucky, I guess, because for most people a guitar is a piece of wood and the name Contreras is just Spanish, so they would no bid a very high price.

I did know the name Contreras in conjunction to guitars. One of my class mates got one at a certain time after a year of waiting, and my then guitar teacher played one. I did not know much about the quality of the build, however. I guessed that every luthier has characteristics in his/her instruments which are appealing or not. One of the important characteristics of the Contreras -besides its beautiful sound- was its quite high price. Which did not appeal to me out of budget restrictions.

The prices which my then guitar teacher wanted to sell the guitar for were not particularly low from my point of view. So, I did not decide right away, I would like to find out if this was a good guitar for me first. Well, I could try out the Contreras for a few months, a trial period which you definitely do not get in the shops. Thus, the guitar went home with me and I spent some time to get used to it.

It became obvious to me right away that the guitar had not a lot of feedback, apparently the Contreras aimed its projection at the audience. What I heard of it, however, pleased me. Its sound was nice and suited my then playing style -soft and almost shy- perfectly.

In this way, I purchased my fourth guitar, a Contreras with Cedar top. I remember the enticing sweet smell of Cedar which came when I opened the case. No surprise, the guitar had been locked up for years. After some time "at sight" I decided to buy the guitar, although not without some encouragement by my wife, because I still considered that realistic price a little too high. "You'll be able to grow a lot on this guitar", she substantiated, "and better guitars cost money".

She was right, I could do a lot more with this guitar. It is (I still have it) a friendly instrument with quite some tolerance with my guitar technique, everything kept sounding well, even when I played less accurate in a technical sense.

Much later the issue "realistic price" turned out to be quite an elastic concept. I found out when I attempted to trade it in when purchasing a new guitar. The trader noticed that my guitar was not a real Contreras -built by the maestro himself- but a guitar which was built by a pupil or guitar workshop which built the Contreras design under licence. This drastically decreased its value, even far below the amount which I paid for it myself with the assumption that I had found a "real" second hand Contreras. So, I kept the instrument, the discount I could get was more than the trade-in value.

At that moment, there was something different too. Rationally speaking I should have traded it in, every penny you can get to buy a better guitar does count, isn't it? Actually, emotionally speaking I could not say goodbye to the Contreras. It was a bit subconscious, I guess and many years later I am glad I did it that way and that I still have her.

Well, in those days -the early nineties- Internet did not exist at the present-day scale, so there were no guitar discussion sites to inquire after things. Only this year (2008) I dared to inquire after the real whereabouts of my Contreras. The main difference already showed from the label: the designation *Guitarrería* implied licence building in a third-party guitar workshop, *Artesiana* meant that it was built by the master himself. My Contreras appeared to be a *Guitarrería* from a workshop in Valencia.

The luthier had customized the headstock and the rosette a bit with reference to the genuine Contreras model, so in fact this guitar is rather unique. Specifically, the design of the rosette was not known on Contreras models. An email with photographs to Manuel Contreras confirmed the outcome of my investigation: it was licence-built. This method -a luthier outsources the construction of for instance study guitars and builds top models only, while selling all guitars under his name- is common practice in Spain. I just was not aware of this when I purchased the Contreras myself. My only consolation was the fact that Contreras himself continuously checked his licensees to prevent them from jeopardizing his good name, so it was an instrument which was worthy of the name Contreras at least.

OK, now I know: Welcome to the Real World!

Because the Contreras had been locked up in the case for quite a long time, she needed some maintenance. Manuel Contreras lives in Spain, which was too far away, so I had to find a luthier in my neighbourhood. My guitar teacher knew someone, Mr. Hermeling in the town of Nijverdal. This man had a decorating business and built and repaired stringed instruments in his leisure hours.

I made an appointment to bring in the Contreras. I must say that I entered the town of Nijverdal quite spectacularly in a veil of mist, because my cylinder head gasket blew up. I could just reach Hermeling's house with my heavily steaming vehicle. Mr. Hermeling appeared to have a beautiful and well-equipped workshop in which he was building classic guitars, lutes, vihuelas and baroque guitars. I was even allowed to give them a try while he was working on the Contreras concentratedly.

What struck me was the calmness he showed when working on the guitar. He gave the wood the time to settle, so to say, no hastily horsing about with machinery, no quick-quick-ready. Thus, I was introduced for the first time to some very important aspects of the luthier, the man/woman behind the guitar: craftsmanship, knowledge of materials and a natural serenity which suits well to the materials he/she is working with.

Fortunately, the guitar was not really damaged: a few frets needed to be smoothed, the action required some tuning and further there was the usual stuff: lubrication of the tuners and putting some oil on the fingerboard. A little bump in the fingerboard at the 12th fret was too small to affect playability. If it got worse he had to fit a new fingerboard, so until further notice the Contreras was ready to play.

The Contreras appeared to be a fine guitar for solo playing. This changed when I focused on ensemble playing in the early nineties. I could understand that it is hard work for the guitarist if you play in a guitar-flute duo, that was not a problem for me. Playing in a guitar duo, however, I suffered from a sense of unbalance. I heard my partner far louder than I heard myself. I have tried to fix it (playing louder, hard tension strings, discussing the balance in the "progress meeting") but it did not work out. The unbalance was annoying and had a poor psychological effect: I felt bogged down at times.

Paulino Bernabé

Gradually I got a need for a guitar which provided more feedback and had sufficient power for an even balance in the guitar duo. The feedback is a good reason -you must be able to hear yourself- but it definitely no solution for balance problems with an innate "louder" player (also refer to the *Guitarity* about Annoyances). Anyway, at that time I considered buying a new guitar -the option to tackle the problem myself- the right solution.

My then duo partner started to play together with one of his ex-students of the conservatory with the -I guess- intention to bring his ensemble play to a more professional level than DOS Amigos could offer. She appeared to play a guitar built by Paulino Bernabé and he became quite enthusiastic about its sound.

Consequently, he became discontent with his own guitar ;-). The grass with the neighbour is often greener- and in this way gradually the idea arose to start playing a Bernabé within DOS Amigos and buy one each. Looking back, I guess it was based on the myth that the duo

sound would become better from playing the same build guitar alone. It is a myth indeed, because the real balance starts in the mind of the ensemble players.

The danger of enthusiasm from hearsay is quite clear, you become a bit biased at the cost of some objectivity.

Paulino Bernabé has a firm reputation in the classical guitar world as a builder of quality guitars. Initially he (Paulino Senior) was the chief of the Ramirez workshop, quite a name for guitars as well, but in 1969 he decided to follow his own course and moved to the Loto in Madrid. His refinement of the traditional guitar design -such as the brace pattern under the top- resulted in a line of guitars which could meet the requirements of modern and contemporary classical guitar music. Bernabé Senior passed away in 2007, his son Paulino Junior became his successor. He follows the tradition of his father with the design of a new line of quite expensive guitars.

The only shop in Holland which is entitled to sell Bernabé guitars is Casa Benelly in The Hague, Benelly Import has exclusive rights for The Netherlands. So, we organised an expedition to the west of the country on a Saturday in the ill-famous rainy month of August 2002.

Casa Benelly sells a comprehensive collection of guitars with prices from relatively cheap to extremely expensive. Generally speaking, the Bernabé's were definitely not in the low-price segment: the cheapest model is about 900 Euros, the top model -proudly carrying the attribute Especial- costs almost ten thousand Euros. It is not surprising that this top model was way over budget for me. Prices like this are affordable if you can for instance subtract them before taxing, which is reserved for musical professionals. For amateurs like me, the Tax Authorities are not cooperative at all to musicianship "done for pleasure" as the explanation of the tax form indicates...

A guitar collection like at Benelly's is a Land of Plenty in which you are staggering around without a clue how to select a guitar with a minimal chance of disappointment after the initial euphoria has faded away. You are literally blinded by the gleaming lacquerware of all those tops. There were an awful lot of luthiers represented, both workshop and maestro built.

Just give it a try, I guessed. Just how do you try best on a guitar which you are not acquainted with? Now years later I know that it's not a matter of an hour, not even a few hours. A well-founded judgement takes a few sessions at least. At that time I was not sufficiently aware of that. To be fair, a drive to The Hague which takes four hours there and back is no real encouragement to go often for a casual session.

It was quite difficult to select between luthiers. Still there was another aspect I did not account for in Benelly's showroom: the differences between guitars of the same build!

With my budget as a marginal value, I decided to ask for some advice in the first place. The outcome was an array of guitars in a specific price bracket which I had to try. A matter of playing, listening and -do not forget- being listened to. The latter was no problem, because we came as a duo.

The best thing to do when testing and comparing guitars is to play a piece which you master well at one side and which addresses technical and dynamic aspects of the instrument on the other. A very simple and basic piece by for instance Carulli will not push the guitar to its limits. Unfortunately, at that time I had only a little better piece, because my solo playing had worn out a bit over the years of duo playing.

Another disadvantage was the playing room which was part of the shop itself, so you got distracted by wandering customers. Playing on a strange guitar under these circumstances has some stage fright like side-effects which affect your judgement in some way.

In a word, I could not judge the solo aspect of the guitar quite well. The duo function was much better -we had some suitable repertoire- so I came across some guitars who did not have the feedback problem.

Finally, and not surprisingly my choice became a Bernabé, a Modelo 10 which was neatly on budget. This price was the reason that Paulino Bernabé had no personal involvement in building this guitar, this instrument was a product of his workshop so the stamp PB on the label was missing and no certificate of authenticity was there, which is logical for this price bracket, a "real" Bernabé costs 4000 Euros more than the humble M10!

This Bernabé M-10 taught me something about the differences between guitars of the same build. The shop had three of them in stock, and they were all remarkably different. I guess they have Mondays and Fridays in a guitar workshop too. After some trying out, one of these guitars looked right to me, it smelled good after some warming up, sounded well, it talked with me as a player and seemed to play reasonably easily, even though the *Lagrima and Adelita Test* was not completely convincing.

What's that, *Lagrima and Adelita Test*? Well, it comes to play *Lagrima* and *Adelita* by Tarrega and sensing the kind of pressure and resistance you meet to play the piece including its ornaments correctly. It's a test on response, action and ease of play in lower and higher positions. Trying single and isolate tricky fragments of a piece is not sufficient, you need to find out if the guitar helps you in the complete piece. By the way, the name of the test is a personal choice: every guitarist has a private (tricky) piece which he/she uses to judge the playability of a guitar.

So, the solo test did not completely succeed. Duo playing, however, was much better because of my routine. And thus, I made the mistake which would cause some regret with the Bernabé later.

The next week we returned to compare our own guitars with the selected new guitars. That was a one-sided fight: the Contreras had better playability, the Bernabé M10 won on feedback, which had been my issue before. My duo partner bought a Bernabé too. Not the same one, it became a M-20, a much more expensive variant than I could afford, which he was lured in to by means of a smart game of *noblesse oblige* concerning professionalism by the shopkeeper. Well, so far so good for the myth of playing the same build, because the M-10 and M-20 are quite different.

Much later I found out that I had made the so called "*New Shoes Error*". I guess you can sense what this is: when you fit new shoes in the shop and you have to use torturing equipment to get into them, the shopkeeper uses to say: "just a matter of getting used to, it will fit comfortably later". Often, they are right, after a week with painful feet new shoes do settle.

This is not true for a guitar. With some emphasis, I now can say: ***This does NOT work with a guitar!*** If a guitar does not give you an impression that the two of you will get along fine: don't buy it, whether it is a well-known build or not. A guitar which costs a few thousand Euros is no half loaf of white, the amount is much too high to purchase a box of annoyances for it. If you are not sure, better be patient and continue the search.

Well, in fact I did make this mistake, so it took me quite a while to get used to the Bernabé. This became particularly clear while playing solo repertoire. The Bernabé turned out to be a grumpy girl at times, if you were only a bit too far from the fret, her reward was a poor tone or even some buzzing. If I was right on spot, the sound was beautiful, but it was quite difficult to play a quick piece for recreation, because the concentration should not wane. That was one of the reasons that I took my Contreras with me on holidays rather than the Bernabé.

At first I did not notice the whims of the Bernabé: I played ensemble most of the time and the instrument was a hit for that. This dramatically changed after DOS Amigos fell apart. At the time, I play solo for the main part, which causes a quite different relationship with your guitar.

The whims got worse, possibly a bit aggravated by the psychologic effect of the dissolution of DOS Amigos, because the guitar was in some sense connected to it in its role as "duo guitar". Of course, it's not fair to blame a guitar for the mistakes of the player, but somehow it works this way, one guitar helps you, the other shows you that you must be helped.

In the end I got used a bit to the technical requirements imposed by the Bernabé . As long as you do not forget the playing accuracy -which does wane a bit as a consequence of performance stress- there is no problem. Nevertheless, it started itching somehow. I felt that I was ready for a next step.

Thus, I started the search for a new guitar.

Theo Scharpach

The first guitar which drew my attention on this search was the classical model by Scharpach. The luthier Theo Scharpach is one of the sponsors of the Twente Guitar Festival and lends his name for some years already to the guitar competition with the same name. Scharpach builds a broad spectrum of guitars from classic to jazz models. His classic model has some interesting novelties like the double sound hole, the lifted finger board and the "soft" cutaway which enables easy access to the higher positions.

I was lucky that my current guitar teacher Jaap Majoor owns one, I could try out his guitar for an evening. My first impression was positive: easy to play -the construction of the neck enabled efficient left hand work-, a well-balanced response to dynamics and a beautiful streamlined tone. Maybe a bit too streamlined, because I failed to fall in love somehow. I did touch the strings of the Scharpach, but the guitar did not touch a string with me!

I guess that's my fault: I heard other guitarists like Marcin Dylla play tremendously beautifully on a Scharpach. On the other hand: if I want to play a guitar myself, I will have to take my own feeling with it as a criterion. Doing so, I started doubting if I want to spare the substantial price of 8000+ Euros for it.

George Ziata

Sometime later I got a message that the distributor of Ziatas Guitars paid a visit to one of the organisers of the Twente Guitar Festival in Enschede, offering me the opportunity to try his guitars if I wished to.

Some Googling gave me more information about this luthier who was quite unknown to me. George Ziatas is an Australian luthier of Greek origin. He uses modern materials, like carbon fibre technology in the bracing and the neck. As a special feature, he builds with curved backs, just like a violin, to achieve a more powerful projection. Because he wanted to aim at the European market he had established a European dealership. His prices were lower than the Scharpach, 5000 Euros for the top model, excluding shipping.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, so I decided to make an appointment. We started in style with home-made Hungarian Goulash Soup and a number of stories about the differences of life in Hungary and Australia, because the Ziatas representative was a Hungarian guitarist. His son currently is a student at the Enschede conservatory and he had come here to visit him.

After the dinner, the guitars came out of the cases. Well, actually I only tried the top model. After an interesting story about the carbon fibre technology for bracing and neck, I got the opportunity to play this guitar. For sure I had taken my Ergoplay and music book with me, so the show could start. I was glad that I was sufficiently relaxed to avoid the usual stage fright when playing for strange people.

Initially I was impressed. The Ziatas has a well-balanced and powerful sound in the complete spectrum, I did not hear offensively emphasized tones: no booming bass or squealing descants. With this guitar, the playability was quite right, I played it like my Contreras, while it was strung with hard tension strings indeed! I was reasonably comfortable with its dynamic response.

I tried music from various style periods, from Renaissance to Romantic with some excursions to arrangements of popular music. I found it sound well. Unfortunately, I could not try the contemporary music for which this class of guitars is designed. Fortunately, there were sufficient guitarists around to demonstrate the Ziatas on this point and I had the opportunity to listen to the guitar from a distance.

The Ziatas did appeal more to me than the Scharpach. Unfortunately, also in this case the connection was missing, I did not fall in love with it. Without a sense like this it becomes quite difficult to judge if the price is well worth it to me personally. I got even more puzzled thinking about the price difference between for instance the Scharpach and the Ziatas.

I started wondering whether my judgement was much too limited. Possibly I missed some information, something about the personality and the intention of the luthier perhaps. On web sites you normally read commercial and appraising stories which in many cases refer to the judgement of others, to be specific well-known (or sometimes unknown) professional guitarists. After having tried a top brand (Scharpach) and a clear runner-up (Ziatas) uncertainty struck with me.

To what extent the judgement of others -in a commercial context- is an absolute measure for me? Isn't the choice of a guitar far more subjective than using the discretion and experiences of others? I guess it is, despite the fact that trade extensively uses the opinion and product choice of VIPs as an asset: "If this VIP selects the product, it's bound to be perfect!"

I guess it's a mix too. There are always influences as a consequence of trust in the judgement of others. That was my problem with the Bernabé, at the moment of selection I already lacked the objectivity to be subjective. Unfortunately, in the end the positive story of

my guitar partner did not fit me! You have to be lucky indeed, to hear the right and reliable impressions.

Bert Kwakkel

My next try-out was triggered by a positive story about a luthier: my current guitar teacher had ordered a guitar with Bert Kwakkel and suggested that I could go with him for a visit, a nice opportunity to try some guitars.

Bert Kwakkel is a well-known Dutch luthier who has built guitars -and currently is building- for musicians in Holland and abroad. Doing so he has won his spurs on international level. Besides tremendous six-string guitars he builds beautiful replicas of baroque guitars and vihuelas, and the more exotic models like a ten-string guitar and a Brahms guitar (an eight-string guitar with large scale).

His web site offers a nice impression of his building activities and the list of guitarists he has delivered his instruments to, is quite impressive. The names of his guitars reflect his passion for ornithology, his top model is called Merula (Latin for blackbird) and the names of his other models Viscivorus (Large European Thrush), Philomelos (Song Thrush) and Lusiana (Nightingale) are a clear reference to well-known songbirds. Just imagine his guitars singing as beautifully as a blackbird on a summer evening!

Thus, I had some reason for great anticipation during the trip from Hengelo via Enschede -to pick up my guitar teacher- to Gaanderen in the east of Holland. Again, I took my Bernabé, Ergoplay and some music with me for the best possible evaluation and comparison with the guitar I own. I wanted to be better prepared than with Benelly's some years ago.

Bert Kwakkel is living on the outskirts of the village, near the fields. A wonderfully peaceful neighbourhood, and later I found this same serenity in his work.

He received us very friendly and led the way to the room where the guitars were standing. It appeared to be the study where his wife gives her guitar lessons, an attractive room with a panoramic view of the fields and portraits of famous guitarists on the wall. A perfect room to get in the mood.

Bert Kwakkel showed all but one of his models: Merula Special, Merula "Classic", Philomelos and a Viscivorus which had returned to the nest after a long peregrination.

Bert Kwakkel briefly introduced his instruments. No, I am telling this in a too formal way: he described the build of his guitars and the wood that he used for it in an animated and enthusiastic way. He did so with the detailed knowledge of a craftsman and connoisseur who has been working with the wood as a natural material for ages.

For instance, the attribute "Special" of the Merula Special originates from the fact that the neck was completely made from Brazilian Rosewood, including the fingerboard. This made the neck an integral part of the tone forming wood of the guitar, which yields extra power and response. Of course, a solid neck like this is heavier. To compensate for this, Bert Kwakkel had added more wood in the sound box. Overall, the guitar weighed more, but it was perfectly balanced. During playing you do not have to "lift" the headstock.

You guess, I was in the Guitar Land of Plenty again. I decided to start with the Viscivorus, I was curious about the sound of an instrument which had been played for over 20 years. She appeared a friendly guitar with considerable tolerances for playing technique. With me, it caused a strong reminiscence about my Cedar top Contreras, even though the Viscivorus had a Spruce top. I considered this guitar very suitable for non-contemporary music: Renaissance, Baroque, Classical and Romantic era.

The next guitar which I tried was the Philomelos, a guitar with Spruce top and back and sides of Hondurese Rosewood. The Philomelos offered more power and response than the Viscivorus, but I did not feel the connection, in some way the guitar and me could not get used to each other. I guess I was too nervous to get a clear impression, while trying new guitars you need some time to settle.

Then it was the Merula's turn. To my surprise after some warming up, the guitar and I got connected. This did not happen to me until then. It's very weird sensing that this guitar was helping me rather than counteract my play. The "punishment" for technical inaccuracy was much milder than with the Bernabé.

And this sound!! The Merula makes the audience happy with a great projection and she makes the player happy with a beautiful feedback. After playing some music from various style periods, I had to come to the conclusion that this guitar impressed me tremendously.

I changed guitars to the Merula Special. The attribute Special was quite appropriate indeed: this guitar offered some grades more in sound and response. The only drawback for me as a player were the carbon strings. I have no experience with these strings, the touché appeared a bit stiff to me. I guess this modern material will react more brightly and give more loudness, but I could not get used to it.

The price difference between a Merula and a Merula Special is 1800 Euros, which is so because the Special takes much more effort to build: for instance, forming and polishing a solid Rosewood neck is a quite labour-intensive process.

If I had plenty of money, I would order a *Special* right away, considering its extra qualities. Because unfortunately my budget is a bit lower than that, as far as I am concerned this price difference forms the limit between a guitar for a fanatic hobby (the way I am using it) and the guitar for professional use. The Merula Special is a genuine concert guitar which is quite prepared to hit the stage of a large auditorium (-) like the "small" auditorium of the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam), it is a guitar for a prof!

So, my conclusion was that the "Classic" Merula would be a beautiful instrument for me. With this in mind, I played the "Classic" Merula for some time, which affirmed me.

Quite a few lines before, I stated that playing a guitar yourself is not sufficient for a complete impression. Well, I had the opportunity to *listen* to the Merula's as well. My guitar teacher had some repertoire which was quite suitable to push the guitar to the limits with respect to tone colour and dynamics. The Merula Special came out on top (plain logic), but in my humble opinion the Merula "Classic" was quite close behind. This confirmed my sympathy -well, I guess a crush is a better word- for the "Classic" Merula.

To have a fair comparison, I compared every guitar of Bert Kwakkel with my own Bernabé for a few pieces. Well, the sound of the Bernabé was not that bad that it did not stand a chance, it is actually pretty good for its price. Playability, response and tone colour of the Merula's, however, are *far* better! I guess I will have to out reason the psychological effect that my

Bernabé becomes unplayable in my mind now that I have experienced the ease and sound of the Merula's.

Playing and listening to high quality instruments like these requires quite some concentration, so at a certain moment I became a bit weary. I got a nice opportunity for a little break, however, because Bert Kwakkel offered a little sightseeing in his workshop. It was a real eye-opener to me, a visit to the place where it is all happening!

He showed me some boards of Brazilian Rosewood and demonstrated the sound of this wood. I hardly could believe my ears: this wood resonated if you tapped it. Normally you hear "plok", but this Palissander responded with "pooong", with sustain, actually! Now I understand why the Merula Special gains so much in power. It was great fun to hold the wood yourself and to sense how solid and heavy it felt: If you want to do some rasping or polishing on this wood, you will be busy for quite a while!

I also saw some guitar tuners -Bert Kwakkel presently uses Sloane Bronze tuners- and their stability surprised me. The tuners of my own guitars -the Bernabé as well- creak at times as a consequence of slack, the Sloane's however operated without any play and noise. They are nice and austere tuners with a lot of reliable mechanical technology inside. No lubrication needed!

Bert Kwakkel offers quite a lot of customization options for his guitars: the scale, finger board width, neck thickness, rosette, the marking of the wood of the back and the tuners to be used. He showed me some tuners which he fitted on customer request. Beautiful mechanics with mother-of-pearl inlay. If you hear their price, however, you start wondering: "where is the gold?"

All these options require a detailed self-knowledge of your physics in the context of guitar playing. For myself I am hardly aware of parameters like fingerboard width and neck thickness, I would not know how to determine the optimum, because I bought all my guitars up till now "as is". I am curious how to measure these optimums. Just measuring? Using rules of thumb?

It appeared less complicated. Bert Kwakkel told me that most people are used to their old guitars and use their sizes for a new instrument. So, I will have to do some measurements!

The fact which impressed me most during my visit was the serenity of Bert Kwakkel during his explanation and his omnipresent devotion to building beautiful and well-built guitars with a great sound which are helpful and motivation for your expression as a player.

This acquaintance with the luthier provided me with a completely different impression of "the name on the label of the guitar" than a demonstration by a dealer or a visit to a music shop. I was glad to have gained this experience. I would recommend getting acquainted with the luthier before buying a guitar, if possible and feasible, of course.

Thus, I left with the positive intention to return, just to assess if my crush on this guitar was a permanent one. Of course, I will take my wife with me, because she knows the ways to be supportive with a decision like this.

Some weeks later I actually returned. The crush was still there and my wife backed me up. So, I ordered a Merula. Due date of completion is about March 2010.

So now I am eagerly waiting until my Merula has matured sufficiently to fly out of the nest!