

My New Guitar



In June 2010, the wait was finally over, my new Merula guitar was completed! Bert Kwakkel first mailed that the main parts were ready, later he announced that the guitar had its strings and finally he reported the instrument completed. I could collect it on a warm and sunny Saturday in June at the beginning of Summer.

About one and a half year had passed since I ordered the guitar. This period gave me time to save most of the money to pay for the instrument. One and a half year seems a long time, but just compare this to the wait for a Hauser built guitar (almost six years, adding insult to injury with a built-in "floating" price increase in the contract to compensate for so called inflation. I heard one case in which the price doubled in this way!)

In the first year the thought of a new guitar was not quite lively with me. Saving money was the first thing to do. So I put aside all the money I earned from the guitar lessons and the small personal benefits that I got. The thought started tickling, however, when Bert Kwakkel called me in the beginning of 2011 that he had the parts of the guitar completed and would start building as soon as he had finished some emergency repairs. At that time, it became clear that I could not save all the money in time. Fortunately, my lovely "audit committee" was willing to subsidize me a bit.

Thus, I went to Gaanderen on a sunny day in June together with my wife Erna to collect the long-awaited new instrument. Despite the distance -about 60 km- it is a drive of about an hour, because that part of the country has no highways, only two-lane roads with quite a lot of traffic lights (particularly the towns of Eibergen and Lichtenvoorde are notorious for them).

Bert Kwakkel gave us a hearty welcome, coffee, tea and cookies were on the table and finally my Merula came from its case.

What do you feel on a moment like this, when you hold your own guitar for the very first time? No, it is not quite the feeling you have when I held my new-born daughters for the first time, but there is some resemblance in the perception.

The Merula was surprisingly light weight. The guitar was well finished and spread the scent of freshly carved wood. The sound was just like I remembered from the try-out, a clear sign that Bert Kwakkel reproduces the quality of his instruments time and time again.

I had transferred the money already, that was no issue. So, Bert could officially hand over the guitar together with a certificate and a prepared spare saddle, and give some good advice too.

The certificate is necessary to certify that you did not obtain the Brazilian Rosewood of the body sides and the back in an illegal way. Brazilian Rosewood is forbidden material unless you owned it at the moment that the import/export ban became valid many years ago. Bert had a nice stock of this Rosewood at the moment that the ban became official and the certificate declares that his Rosewood is exempted from the ban.

The lower saddle will come in handy if the action of the guitar increases a bit. This is quite well possible because the wooden construction of the guitar -including the neck- has to settle itself a bit under "operational" conditions.

I got instructions for maintenance. I should polish the finish of the sides, back, top and neck with a special polisher with camphorated spirits. The finger board required a preparation with cooked linseed oil once per half year up to once per year. He gave me a bottle of polisher to start with.

Bert also gave instructions for the fluid balance. He builds his instruments in a workshop with a fairly low humidity level. This makes the instruments more low-humidity-resistant; you have some headroom at the low humidity end in the Dutch climate. I was surprised to hear that a low humidity is much worse for the condition of the guitar than a high humidity. An accurate hygrometer is an important measurement instrument to assess if you need a guitar humidifier.

Bert strongly advised to take out a good insurance policy for musical instruments. His description of the repairs that became necessary after a few accidents with a guitar -for instance a split top after the guitar was accidentally dropped- and the cost involved made the necessity of insurance quite clear. The cost of replacement of a top for instance may approach the price of a new guitar!

Later I learned that finding a suitable instrument insurance is no sinecure. Many insurance companies consider a guitar as a valuable that should be locked away in a fire-resistant and earthquake-proof safe.

Well, that is not what a guitar is intended for! It has to be played! Unfortunately, in many valuable insurance policies, accidents during playing and carrying or transporting the instrument are beyond coverage, while in these situations the chances of damage are quite high. In this way, you pay a premium in gold while the policy does not even cover the normal act of playing.

Fortunately, I succeeded in finding a good instrument insurance with reasonable conditions at a fair price. World-wide coverage, including accidents "on-stage" and "on the road" (except for theft from a car).

Finally, Bert mentioned that he would like to see the guitar after half a year for a check-up. At that occasion, he would demonstrate fingerboard maintenance too.

The road back home seemed to last much longer, because I could not wait to start playing in.

Meanwhile I have played my Merula for some time and I enjoy it every day. It was a bit getting used to in the beginning. Particularly the excessive force I was applying with the left

hand (the Bernabe required quite some pressure, particularly with the first frets). Gradually the guitar becomes familiar, however...

What strikes me at many occasions is the fact that the Merula's response naturally invites you to play with sound and dynamics. Slurs -my weak point- are so much better on this guitar! Even the fourth finger ones!

Nevertheless, she is self-willed at times. One day she invites you to make the most of it, the other day she just reflects your mood. Guess what happens if you are in a bad mood...

It remains a fact, however, that I immensely enjoy playing the best guitar I have ever owned!