

# THE WORKSHOP

## *Philip Woodfield*

PHILIP WOODFIELD'S WORKSHOP IS BASED IN EAST SUSSEX AND HE HAS BEEN BUILDING HIGH-END CLASSICAL GUITARS FOR NEARLY 30 YEARS. PLAYERS WHO USE HIS INSTRUMENTS INCLUDE POLAND'S PRESTIGIOUS KUPINSKI GUITAR DUO AND OUR VERY OWN RAY BURLEY.

**A**t the highest level, classical guitars are built for tone and projection, players often having to compete with orchestras in terms of volume – and the idea of amplification is still considered something of a taboo among the classical cognoscenti! I started our conversation by asking Philip when it was that he first became interested in guitar building.

'From the age of 11, the first time I entered a woodwork room, I felt I belonged there,' he says. 'Later, I served a horrible apprenticeship as a joiner, during which time I started to play the guitar, music being the other big interest in my life. So the light bulbs went on pretty quickly and I started making my own guitars. After the third one I put my notice in and left employment; there's no logic in it really, it was something I had to do regardless of consequences.'

### **What is your basic philosophy behind guitar building?**

I used to be definite about the right way to build; the right glue, the right finish, the right sound, but my experience has taught me that there are many ways. A maker's sound is so difficult to define or rationalise, but I could sum up my philosophy by saying that the most important thing, for me at least, is the ear – being true to the basic precept of tone. Responsiveness is a key ingredient for me, too. It sounds obvious, but that includes responsiveness to dynamic



change – a player needs to feel that energy put in causes an equal response in sound, but also that the quiet sounds have subtle layers of overtone.

**The steel string acoustic world is awash with different body sizes and woods – yet the classical guitar world has remained in a more traditional design area in**

**both those respects. Are there any innovations going on beneath the surface with classical guitar building?**

Plenty of innovations, the scene has changed a lot over the years. The two main ones being lattice bracing and double tops. Externally it's different, though – and here is something of an enigma; by and large classical guitarists



love innovation inside the instrument but are very conservative when it comes to the outside. For example, the raised fingerboard, which helps a little with left-hand access, is generally accepted, but the cutaway, which helps a lot with left-hand access, is not really accepted.

Regarding the attitude to wood, it's true that for many years there seems to have been only two options for classical guitar but this is changing. Ninety percent of my customers now are happy to go along with any recommendation I make, which for me includes a fair variety of woods for the back and sides.

**You say that you don't use much in the way of machines during a build and prefer a more hands on approach – why is this?**

It's not that I have anything against machines; they are useful tools like any other, but within reason. I need the hands-on approach in order to be in touch with the characteristics of each piece of wood – and that is important when I'm matching pieces with each other and in the context of the model type and for whom I'm building. It's a finely balanced thing. But, beyond all that, I like woodwork in the traditional sense – I like the feel of it.

**Where do you source your timber?**

I have a large stock of most of the woods I like to use. Some of the rare stuff comes up only occasionally and I have to buy opportunistically. The spruce top wood is the most important to me and every couple of years or so I make a trip through the Alps to select the right wood. This is the single most important thing that I do in the whole process of guitar building and it's not easy. I go through thousands of graded tops and often find just a few.

**Has the classical guitar building world been at all affected by the CITES Treaty?**

The Brazilian rosewood

problem has been around for long enough for us all to get used to it. More woods are being added to these lists, many of them what we might consider less exotic staple constructional wood, like mahogany. It's not just CITES though, the US Lacey Act is proving very complex. All wood used, including the rosette, must be identified by type and source and be ethical in order to ship a guitar to the States. The goalposts move constantly and it's quite hard to know what woods one can safely build a good stock of for the future.

I applaud anything that can help save the forests and I think the buying public should be more keen on accepting alternative wood. I think there are more discoveries to be made in terms of finding new woods. I was asked a while back specifically for a guitar made in beech. I was skeptical – this is not a tone wood. It had to come from a certain place, be



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heartwood, be a certain age and all this based on a feeling. I was lucky enough to find just the right thing and the result was very surprising, in fact it out-projected several of my loudest guitars! Together with my son, Oliver, a few more instruments have been made with that little batch of wood and there is something special with all of them – there is therefore no technical reason to limit oneself to "standard" woods.

**How would someone commission a build from you?**

Usually customers contact me through my website and enquire about the length of my waiting list. Once an order has been established I generally ask if they can tell me something about themselves and their playing style before I get to the point of starting the build – I like to have some idea of who I'm building for. Some don't want this and just order blind or ask for something like one they have heard, but many send a video or make the trip to my workshop to show me how they play before I start. It helps me and it becomes more personal.



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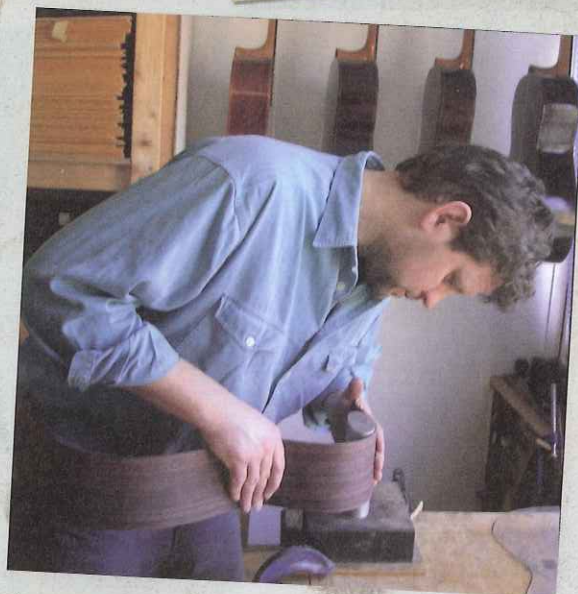
## When you are building for different players are there any customised features that you can include?

Actually, most classical players want the dimensions to be very much standard, with minor adjustments to action. Occasionally I have commissions for multi-string guitars and these, perhaps because they are coming from a different mindset, often include many other adaptations. For me, the principal customisation is the choice of wood and because I am always looking for the same kind of ideal top, the interesting variable comes with the back. I find that some players will suit a wood that gives a characterised tone, others need more neutral response.

## The nylon string guitar can be a notoriously quiet instrument – how do you go about building in the power and projection needed in a concert classical guitar?

Many people's experience of the nylon strung guitar, particularly if coming from a steel string background, is of poor volume. But not all nylon strung guitars are that quiet, particularly modern guitars. Most of the loud guitars seem to have one similarity – reduced mass in the top. That works for a light player but because a powerful or strong player may well push some low mass tops over the limit and the sound may "break", I am careful not to overdo this. There is another danger in only aiming for volume, in that the tone can really suffer. In the end, these are still guitars – strings individually plucked with flesh or nail, not even played with a plectrum – and there are natural limits. Volume, yes, but not at the expense of tone. My guitars are considered loud, but I step back from making them as loud as I could, in favour of retaining the sound I want.

Then there is projection, which is not quite the same thing, of course. I find that many a guitar that sounds loud is out-projected by one that didn't seem so loud when playing it.



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## The classical guitar world has a rich heritage that goes back a few centuries – what sort of thing do you think the future holds for the craft?

I wish I knew. Tools are changing, the available woods are changing, tastes are changing. I hope that the classical guitar will always be recognised for what it can do best, not for what it can't quite do well enough. By this I mean that it is an instrument of great beauty in tone – and more than that, has a great variety of sounds that can be produced in a tactile and personal manner. It has intimacy. We have made great advancements in the volume of the classical guitar, however it is delicate and beautiful and I feel we need to concentrate more on that, rather than being preoccupied with volume at all costs.

## A PLAYER'S PERSPECTIVE

Acoustic's very own classical guitar guru Ray Burley plays Philip's guitars – I asked him how he first came across the instruments...

'I've been using English guitars for a long time and before I started using Philip's I had a Christopher Dean guitar and before that a Martin Fleeson, which I used for 20 years. I was really happy with the

Fleeson, but I just got tired of the sound; I wanted to move on, try something new. I'd played some of Philip's guitars in the past – the standard instruments, not the lattice construction – and I tried one of the new lattice versions and I was completely bowled over. I thought it was phenomenal in so many ways: it had more than enough volume for your average concert, a great tonal response very well balanced across the trebles and basses. Everything I'd been looking for, really,' says Ray.

## What would you say was the biggest difference between Philip's guitar and the ones you had been using?

The main thing was the construction – the crisscross lattice underneath the soundboard. There is a very well known Australian maker, Greg Smallman, who uses that principle but his guitars are horrendously expensive and I don't like the sound at all. At first I was a little bit concerned that Philip's guitar might sound similar, but it sounds nothing like that and it's really responsive to tonal changes and a very traditional sound, which was what I was looking for. John Williams still uses a Smallman and he seems very happy with it and that's fine... It's such a personal thing, you know?

I've loved my guitar from day one; normally a classical guitar will take a couple of years to settle down and improve, but mine was phenomenal from the start and it's just got better and better. The one I'm using now is six years old and in that time Philip has made me two more that he thought were better, but I disagree and so I've kept the first one.





## Do you ask for any personal customisations on your instruments from Philip?

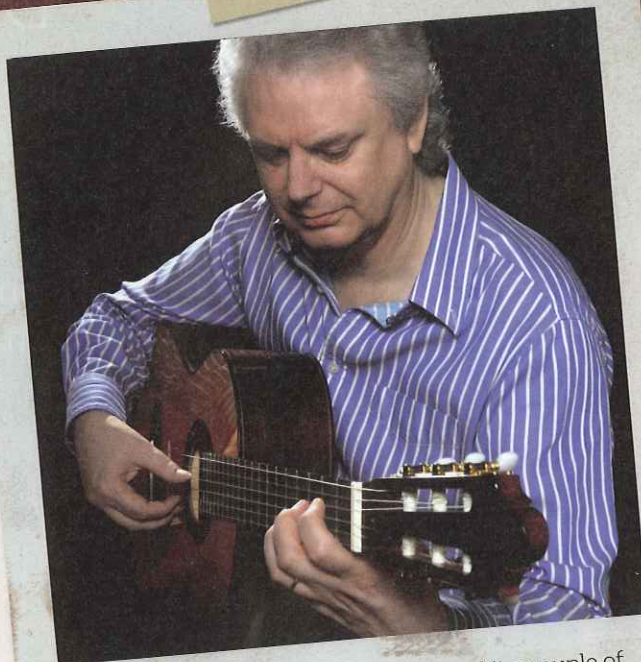
You can, but I wouldn't. If you decide to sell the guitar, then you've got problems. All Philip did really was to take a look at my Martin Fleeson guitar and adjust the action to that, because it suited me really well. But apart from that it's a very standard guitar.

## So you go for a standard neck profile and things like that?

Pretty much, yes. Every maker has their own design of neck and it's like driving someone else's car – it feels odd for about ten minutes, but after that you just get used to it. Philip's neck profile seems very comfortable and I've not bothered to change anything at all.

## Ray also plays live with John Etheridge, Clive Carroll and Gordon Giltrap as a member of Four Parts Guitar – I asked him if he uses a microphone on his guitar.

I did, but I've actually moved on from that. I now use a JHS guitar with a built-in transducer and that seems actually to work better live. The instrument itself is not better, but the amplification



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system is because the problem with using a mic is that you're always on the edge of feedback if you're not careful – but the JHS guitar works really well from that point of view. But as far as Philip's guitar is concerned, I played the Rodrigo Guitar Concerto a couple of weeks ago, without an amplifier and in front of a 60 piece orchestra and it still projected over the top. It was actually in a large church and

there was an amplification system there and we were prepared to use it, but in rehearsal we decided we didn't need it.

**One of the things that tends to be a massive variable for classical players is their choice of strings – and in the classical world it's not down to string gauge, but rather string tension...**

Again, it's a very personal thing, but I've been using D'Addario Pro Arté normal tension for probably more than 20 years and in that time, like most players, I've experimented with other strings but I keep coming back to

D'Addario and normal tension seems to suit every guitar I've ever used. A while ago I was playing in America and I had a phone call from the guy who owns the Savarez company and he gave me some prototypes and I just found them too brittle. I did use them for a while, but I gave up on them in the end.

## What about solo repertoire? Do you have a favourite composer?

My favourite composer is Bach; I do play a lot of Bach. There's nothing better in the repertoire, even though it isn't guitar music; he wrote nothing for the guitar, but his lute and cello

music arranges so well and it sits so well on the instrument. I also like contemporary music, but not very much in between; I'm not a great fan of 19th century music...

## One contemporary piece that is firmly embedded in the classical repertoire in Benjamin Britten's 'Nocturnal'.

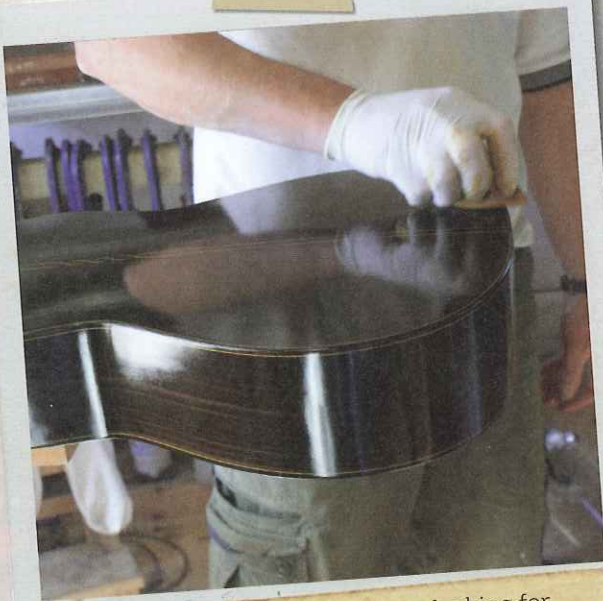
Oh, yeah, I've played that a lot. It's just that when you're programming you have to be careful who you play it to because, as guitarists, we like Britten's 'Nocturnal', but not everybody does.

**Programming must be, as you say, awkward because the repertoire for the classical guitar is comparatively small when compared to piano or violin...**

Yes, and the fact that just because there's music there, it doesn't mean that you're going to like it all, of course. Classical guitarists are always looking for something that's theirs and nobody else's and so they're commissioning composers or searching out music that other players haven't got. But, for me, working with John Etheridge and Gordon Giltrap; not everybody does that and that sort of style of music, but I'm glad to, just to do something different.

[www.woodfieldguitars.com](http://www.woodfieldguitars.com)  
[www.raymondburley.com](http://www.raymondburley.com)

David Mead



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