

FROM A GUITAR MAKER'S NOTES
CHANGES IN THE CONSTRUCTION 2010
by Sebastian Stenzel, guitar maker

With few exceptions, I've been making and evolving the same model of classical guitar since 1990, following the plantilla (the outline of the guitar body) I had designed during my apprenticeship years. Since 2010, however, this plantilla has practically been replaced by a new one. Along with this alteration, I also changed a certain aspect of the soundboard construction. Both together make up what I refer to as my new model. Here are some comments how these changes came about:

One of the most critical points in making a good guitar is the balance of bass and trebles. The guitar tends to be bass-heavy, mainly due to the greater mass of the bass strings. To build strong, lyrical, singing trebles up to the highest frets is one of the greatest challenges to every guitar maker. Each guitar is always a compromise of some sort, and to have a guitar with such trebles, but also floating, sonorous basses, seems to be short of impossible. One way that does work is the approach Antonio de Torres followed: simplified, he built a relatively small (compared with guitars made today) guitar that was extremely light. But this type of guitar often shows a bad overall balance, and does not fit neither the sound ideal, nor the playing technique of many of today's players.

Knowing perfectly well how I could achieve sonorous, floating basses, I was never willing to pay for it with loss of treble quality. Nor were my customers. But the desire to have both didn't let me rest. It took me years of thinking and three different prototypes to succeed. (Another of these prototypes lives on as a chamber music model).

For reasons I don't want to go into here, it makes sense to make the soundboard not too wide. There are, in my opinion, two remarkably successful plantillas in the history of classical guitar making: one was designed by Hermann Hauser I in the 1930s, the other is the one Ignacio Fleta developed. Both achieve a relatively big surface, thus consequently a big body volume, while keeping the width of the soundboard relatively small. Hauser, by designing a plantilla almost approaching a rectangular shape; Fleta, on the other hand, by creating an unusual big ratio of upper to lower bout, i.e. with a relatively small width at the lower bout and a big sized upper bout. (I'm biting back any considerations if these choices bear any correlation to the respective character or preferences of these makers...)

Unfortunately, a plantilla designed heeding only my acoustical concepts does not appeal to me aesthetically.

For a long time I couldn't make up my mind as to how far I was ready to sacrifice aesthetical for acoustical considerations. Finally I found a good compromise. The new plantilla helps to get the bass sound I want, without taking power off the trebles.

More important is a change in the soundboard construction. With a traditional fan bracing (I use 6 fan braces with 2 closing bars, and a slanted "Hernandez" - bar meeting the lower sound hole bar) I found a way to increase the efficiency of the soundboard: with less energy from the string, there is more movement of the soundboard. Consequently, the guitar modulates even better, changes of sound colour, vibrato, etc. is easier, and the guitar is even slightly louder. The latter is especially remarkable, because all known attempts to increase the loudness of the guitar usually resulted in a decrease of modulation capacity.

I don't want to exaggerate, but everyone who could compare the "old" with the new model, said the new was clearly better. But when I tested the new model with a guitarist who plays an older Stenzel guitar, I found that his instrument (made 1996) had developed so well under his skilled hands that I wondered if I had made any progress at all. Just to put things in proportion.