

Fretts

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THE CLASSIC GUITAR *by John C. Tanno*

A Tribute to Vicente Tatay, Jr., Master Luthier And A Pioneer of Modern Classical Guitar Construction In This Country

"He who works with his Hands is a Laborer.

He who works with his Hands and his Brains is a Craftsman.

He who works with his Hands, his Brain, and his Heart is an ARTIST."

(Author Unknown)

Some Background:

The latter statement aptly applies to Vicente Tatay, Jr., a member of an internationally known family of guitar-makers, who for more than a century have been continuously engaged in the subtle Luthier's art. Mr. Tatay, Sr., established the family business in 1861 in Valencia, Spain. Today, Mr. Tatay Jr.'s, seven brothers and a sister are actively engaged in the construction of guitars, in the true tradition of the Spanish Luthier, in two factories with some 200 employees.

Vicente Jr., at the age of twenty-four finally yielded to that relentless urge to travel, to come to America and, in 1920 left his native Valencia and sailed to this country. His parents were not too happy about his going, but, he said, "I wanted to see the world." From his arrival in 1920 and until 1925 he went from job to job along the Eastern Seaboard. For a time he worked in the tobacco fields of New Britain, Connecticut, and subsequently, the restless Vicente worked in factories that manufactured electric fittings.

He was not happy with the way things were going, something was wrong, something was missing. This aimless shifting from job to job was not to his liking. He was searching for stability and some compatible employment for which his soul hungered. Enough was enough! He came to the realization that if he was going to find happiness in this wonderful new country, he would have to engage in work associated with guitars and music. So, in 1925, with his savings and a nostalgic urge, opened a music and record shop at 1329 Fifth Avenue (between 111th and 112th streets) in New York City.¹

Soon, however, he branched out into selling fine guitars, lutes, bandurrias and other accessories. He was joined in the business by his brother-in-law, Gabriel Oller who shortly afterward went in business for himself, his firm is still do-

ing business under the name of: Spanish Music Center Inc., Belvedere Hotel, 319 W. 48th Street, New York, New York 10036. He is well known. He now deals chiefly in guitar music, Spanish music and records, and Tatay guitars most of which are imported from Valencia, Spain. The guitars of this period were imported from the family factory in Valencia. They were sent in parts and assembled and finished in the little back room of the store. Later the following procedure was followed, (as related to Gregory d' Alessio, Editor of SCG Bulletin, by Gabriel Oller and written in the SCG Winter-Spring issue, 1963-1964, pp. 14-15; and currently being done in the same way:

"As advertised, Tatay guitars are made in Valencia, sure enough — they are finished here in New York at Oller's shop in Ozone Park, Queens. They arrive here sans varnish, bridge, frets, or tuning machine. In the shop, these raw, unadorned boxes are then subjected to every change in climatic conditions hot, cold, damp, dry — and under the watchful eye of Tatay himself, their reaction noted. Only after all doubt as to the effect of these tests upon the wood has been established, is the process of finishing commenced. Those boxes that crack excessively, are discarded. Those whose cracks or warps are repairable by means of shims or woodgrafting and other methods, are kept in the works. That is why this system, says Oller, circumvents



the disasters that befall precious instruments made over-seas of uncured woods, and shipped here to suffer the hostile attacks of arctic cold, tropic heat, jungle dampness and desert dryness. That is why, Oller adds, Tatays never crack . . ."

However, sometime in 1925 a person came into the store and asked Mr. Tatay to make him a guitar. He found it difficult to resist the urge to create a guitar, and thus began making his own guitars in the makeshift workshop in the back of the store, where he spent more and more of his time; leaving the other aspect of store management to his brother-in-law Gabriel and his brother Jorge. To this day practically all of the Tatay guitars are custom made or special orders. They do import some guitars from Valencia.

In 1928 he married a charming Puerto Rican girl, Isabel, and by this time the demand for his hand-made guitars had increased to such an extent that he devoted practically all his time to guitar-making. Shortly after, he moved his



Used by the factory in Valencia, Spain, operated by the sons of Vicente Tatay.



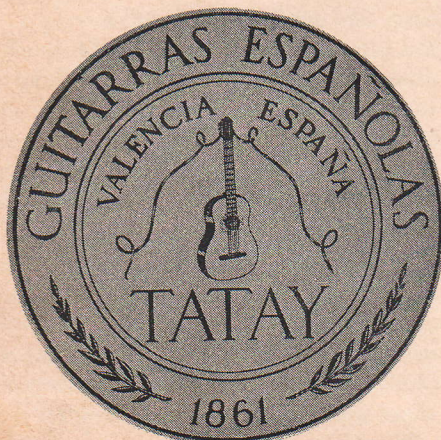
Used by one brother in Valencia, Spain who operates his own factory called, Vicente Tatay Tomas.



Used in this country by Vincinte Tatay Jr., between the years 1954 and 1964.

store and shop to 147 West 46th Street and continued making guitars for customers on special orders. Requests for his custom-made instruments became so numerous that he could not continue to operate both the store and his guitar-making in the back room of his store. Tatay's store was a mecca for the aficionados, they came from everywhere. The truth of the matter was, they took up too much of his time and consequently got behind in his orders. He tolerated this until 1945 when he decided to move to Holtsville, Long Island, where sometime ago he had purchased some land upon which he had built a small summer cottage, where they spent their vacations. By this time he had four children, three boys and a girl. So, he had an addition made to the cottage and the Tatay's gave up the store and moved to his new quarters. He continued making guitars in his home, and shortly afterward built a small shop in the backyard and there devoted his full-time to making his beloved guitars. At long last he was free, he was in his glory. "This is what I want," said Vincente.

The writer has been pretty close to



Used today by sons (Andrew & Gabriel) of Vincente Tatay Jr. in this country, from the year 1964.

the Tatay guitar activities for more than thirty years. He has watched the growth and development of his children through the years. His frequent visits to the store and guitar shop, the Tatay home in Farmingville, L.I., and his new permanent headquarters, a few blocks from the small shop in the back of his home, located at 655 Horseblock Road, Farmingville, L.I., N.Y.

The Tatay Boys and Guitars:

When the writer moved from the New York area, he kept in touch with the Tatays by correspondence and visits from time to time when possible. The last such visit was in the summer of 1966. Vincente was in Spain visiting his family, so did not get to see and visit with him. By this time Mr. Tatay had turned over the business to his two sons, Andrew and Gabriel, the youngest. "This is the fourth generation of the family. It is something that makes you proud," said Andrew, the oldest of the Tatay boys. The three, Andrew, Victor² and Gabriel are the indigenous U.S. extension of the Tatay tradition of classical guitar makers. Andrew has the touch of a fine luthier with Gabriel developing right along. Their children, no doubt, will carry on this fine tradition. The two boys make most of the guitars now. "My father," said Andrew, "makes a guitar now and then."

Tatay guitars are sturdy and well constructed. The tone and timbre are both sonorous and vibrant. They have the characteristic Spanish sound, and stand-up well. It seems, that Tatay guitars once tuned to pitch tend to stay in pitch for a long time — even a month or more. Why? Yo no se. Andrew said that, "the Tatay guitars are constructed in the classical manner," and that the design has remained constant, unchanged for more than a century. "The most important part of the design," he went on to say, "is the dimension of the neck and the spacings of the frets in relation to the bridge." In other words, "the distance from the top of the neck of the guitar to the twelfth fret, has to be the same as the length from the twelfth fret to the bridge." Concerning woods used in the construction of the guitar, Andrew said, "Different woods produce different tones. Rosewood has the best resonance. (Rosewood is difficult to work with and cracks easily). But we also use mahogany, spruce and some ebony . . . We make about 500 guitars each year, with a price range from \$89 to \$450."

Andrew, regarding his life work, made this observation, "I make a good living here, and this is a good life. I see things



V. Tatay installing inlay around sound-hole.

I make by hand, and they grow there in front of me." Andrew's brother Gabriel feels the same way about guitar-making but said it this way, "When I left school I went into the army. Then I left the army and went into the shop to make guitars. That has been my life and I like it. And I very much like the work I am doing." This was not always the case. Human destinies sometimes have to be shaped and altered, like the wood in making guitars. A parallel expressed by Andrew points this observation up. Speaking of the bending of the side pieces (bouts) to the proper curve, Andrew says, "The curved sides of the guitar are shaped around an oval metal pipe that is heated with an electrical core. The wood must be perfectly shaped each time according to the design, and it *cannot be forced*. It has to be *smoothed gently into shape*." So it is in dealing with people.

Andrew, the writer recalls, started working, part-time, with his dad as a small child. At that time all the work was done by hand, now they have a few machines to cut out some of the guitar parts. He took naturally to guitar-making and, like his father Vincente, was quick and willing to learn. He seemed to know, even at this age, what his life work was to be. Now at 36 years of age he feels even more so and plans to spend the rest of his life making and improving guitars. Such dedication is a necessary adjunct in any worthwhile endeavor.



Andrew Tatay installing frets on finger-board.



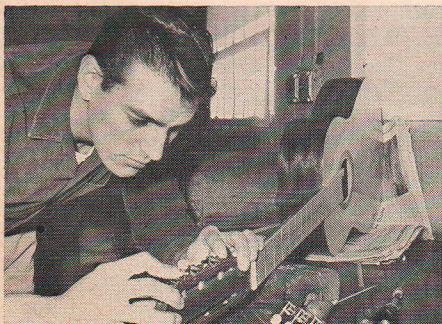
Andrew Tatay spraying a guitar.

Andrew and his charming wife Margaret and their lovely six children: Debra, 13, Laura, 11, Theresa, 10 Andrew, 7, Michael, 5 and James 3, live in their beautiful home in nearby Holtsville. The house was a gift from his father and mother. The girls are studying classical guitar with the well known concert artist, Rodrigo Riera, who now lives in New York City. He comes to Long Island weekly to teach in Patchogue. Andrew is quite active in civic affairs, when time permits. At the present time he is a volunteer fireman with the Holtsville-Farmingville fire department. While visiting the family, in July 1966, at the shop, he received a call to duty and had to leave for a little while. Upon his return, he said, "A man was dying, we had to rush him to the hospital." Except for a two years (1952-1954) when he served in the United States Army, Andrew has been making guitars since he was a little boy.

Gabriel, now 27 years of age, and his lovely wife Marilyn have been married for 3 years. They have one daughter, Jennifer, and they live in a nice modern home, a wedding gift from papa and mama Tatay, located also in Holtsville.

The Tatay daughter, very pretty, Marie Cecilia was married in 1953, and with her husband and children reside in Carona, Long Island.

Mr. and Mrs. Vincente Tatay have worked hard and diligently to raise their family and to establish the firm of "Tatay & Sons." They survived some



Gabriel Tatay fitting a pair of tuning machines.

very difficult times. Their love and devotion to each other and to the children, as each came along, was very touching. Mr. Tatay was quick of movement, worked rapidly and lovingly on his guitars. Each a special creation. He reacted to his guitars as though they were human. He is an intense man, sincere, unaffected, generous, a good man in every sense of the word. His wife, level-headed Isabel, kept things moving smoothly in the Tatay household. They have come a long way, the hard way.

Additional Tatay Comments And Observations:

The Tatay philosophy of guitar construction, except for a few minor points, is quite in line with the views expressed in the H. E. Huttig article, "The Guitar Maker And His Techniques" which comprised the entire, "Guitar Review No. 28 — Guitar Construction From A to Z."³ Guitar Review is published by The Society of the Classic Guitar, 409 East 50th Street, New York 22, New York. The following is quoted from a letter from Gabriel, who in this instance, speaks for Andrew and Vincente:

"In reading through . . . "Guitar Construction From A to Z" — we found that our philosophy was exactly that . . . described under the section titled "Woods Used In The Construction Of The Body" — except for two areas: One is the part about tentellones (these are small triangular blocks used to join the top and back to the sides of the guitar). We feel it is not important to use them on the back but instead a thin strip of wood is sufficient to support the back to the sides.⁴ The reason being to keep the weight of the guitar 'down,' which we feel is the most important part of guitar construction. Also, very important, is the fan bracing which was depicted incorrectly in the diagrams shown on page 5. Our design is not as shown over our name but that one which is shown over the name of Panormo.

"We still, to this day, use all the hand tools . . . described in the

story about luthiers, but use electric machinery whenever possible. We are opposed to re-enforcing necks with metal or artificial means. We have begun using American Tuning Machines with aluminum rollers since they seem to last indefinitely.

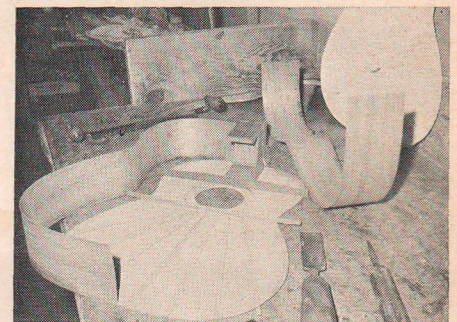
"We feel that at the present time, there is not a commercially produced guitar made in America that meets the standards of a true Classical Guitar except ours. All American manufactured guitars are made in two piece fashion (neck and body separate) and then glued together.

"Except for the above you may say that the text of "Guitar Construction From A To Z" is exactly as we find it and also the part entitled, "The Unique Art Of The Spanish Luthier."

As for experimentation in classical guitar construction, they have this to say:

"We have tried through the years various experiments but have found that the established fashion for fine guitar construction will continue, in order that a quality instrument will result. You may take many shortcuts to save time and material but you also lower the value of the instrument. Our outlook is to continue to be as fussy as we have in the past and to continue to search for methods to improve the Spanish Guitar, both in sound and in appearance."

Concerning the future of the classical guitar, the following observations are pertinent and timely. We need to take a good had look at what is happening to



Basic inner construction of a Tatay Guitar.

1. The writer recalls the purchase of his first Tatay guitar, (Incidentally Mr. Gregory d' Alessio bought his first guitar there also), a birthday gift from his wife, in September of 1938 at this store; and also had his first lesson in classical guitar with Jorge Oller. To illustrate the sturdiness and fine construction of the instrument, Mr. Tatay proceeded to pound the back of the guitar with the knuckles of his hand until it seemed the guitar would crack open (it didn't) it just boomed like a happy drum. For seventeen years this guitar served the writer well until he was pressured into selling it to one of his pupils, a student of the late, Frank Lloyd Wright's School of Architecture, Taliesin West, Scottsdale, Arizona. The guitar is still going strong. Two other concert guitars of Tatay vintage are in the writer's collection, intact, in perfect condition.
2. Victor does not live with the Tatays, and does not engage in the making of guitars. His father said that he is not cut out for this work.
3. ". . . However, the problem of my shortcomings in literary skill was soon solved by enlisting the aid of John Tanno, a highly qualified writer and long standing member of The Society Of The Classic Guitar. Mr. Tanno was gracious enough to engage in the task of reworking the rhetorical structure of the article as well as adding many valuable references and much erudition of his own. I take this opportunity to express my thanks to him for his patience and skill in developing the article." H. E. Huttig II.
4. "Separate tentellones are never used at the joint of the back with the body." H. E. Huttig II.

the guitar. Where is it going? What can we do about it? What do you think? Tatay says:

"We regret to say that the classical guitar made in this country is very disheartening when one examines the quality used in the instrument (material and construction design). Even old, well established names are resorting to lowering their standards. The reason may well be the tremendous flow of junk being imported into this country. We certainly hope this trend will slow to a halt and that people may begin to appreciate a fine instrument once again.

"The great fad for guitar caused this unfortunate occurrence and, the demands for guitars so great that quality manufacturers in the past were allowed to lower their quality standards and still retain their reputations. Only the professional has seen the change and many have tried to expose these manufacturers to their pupils.

"For example, a few years ago almost all manufacturers switched from bone to plastic for the bridge nut and upper nut. A few companies even resorted to plastic bridges which in most cases lift (off) because they are not porous enough to hold a glue bond. But they continue to remain tops among the guitar field solely because they continue to concentrate on the finishing of the instrument, and, on this basis does it keep its reputation. It seems a shame that approximately 80% of young people buying guitars today buy only by appearance and not material and tonal quality of an instrument.

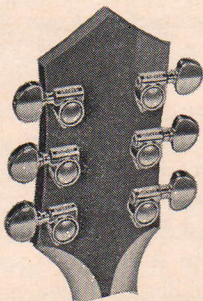
"We have tried, with the few encounters with the public, to educate them on the correct manner to select a good instrument at a reasonable price so as to perhaps remain interested in learning to play and, when they are ready for a better instrument, they will be making a good investment. We have found many cases of people deciding to begin guitar . . . (then) go out and buy a toy (guitar) for a few dollars and begin to take lessons. Very soon they become disenchanted because they feel they are not progressing, not knowing that the guitar they are trying to play is what is discouraging them because of the very hard action,

bad tonal quality and poor volume.

"In summing up we will close by saying that we feel that the classical guitar will remain as an instrument for the very serious player as has all other classical instruments through the ages."

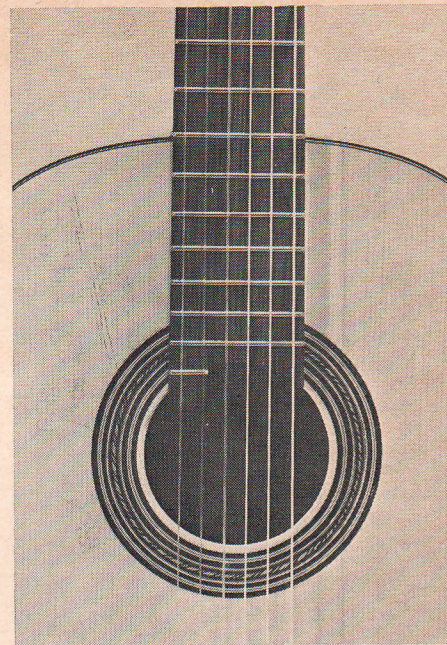
There is no doubt that "The American House Of Tatay" as they (Tatays) like to refer to themselves, will be on the guitar scene a long, long time. At present, including the U.S.A. branch of the Tatay family, there are some 200 of them (more to follow), and a goodly number are engaged in making guitars.

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