

A M E R I C A N L U T H E R I E

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Meet the Maker: Andrea Tacchi

by Woodley White



IMAGINE building classical guitars in Florence, Italy, perhaps the most beautiful and best-preserved Renaissance city in the world. Firenze, as it's called there, with its soft light and warm weather, nestled in the rolling hills of Tuscany along the River Arno, is a city that was home to legends such as Dante, Botticelli, Machiavelli, Brunelleschi, Michelangelo, and Galileo, to name a few. The setting itself can take your breath away.

In this amazing architectonic center, Andrea Tacchi crafts classical guitars, honoring both past and present masters as he brings his own creativity and artistic talent to the work. His workshop is located on the second floor of the home built by his great-grandfather perhaps a mile from the Ponte Vecchio. Andrea lives in the Tuscan countryside with his wife and his son, Giovanni, and like thousands of other Florentines, commutes around town on his motor scooter.

I was introduced to Andrea by my friend, John Weissenrieder, who was apprenticing with him at the time, and affectionately referred to him as his Maestro. I was fortunate to visit Firenze four times over the past fifteen years and a highlight of each trip was the visit to Andrea's workshop. He has become a close friend and a person I admire for his integrity and approach to life, as well as his approach to lutherie. He makes amazing guitars, and he is a person of utter humility who approaches life with humor, kindness, creative vision, and innate talent. He puts it all into his work, which grew out of a childhood dream.

Tell us about your childhood in Florence.

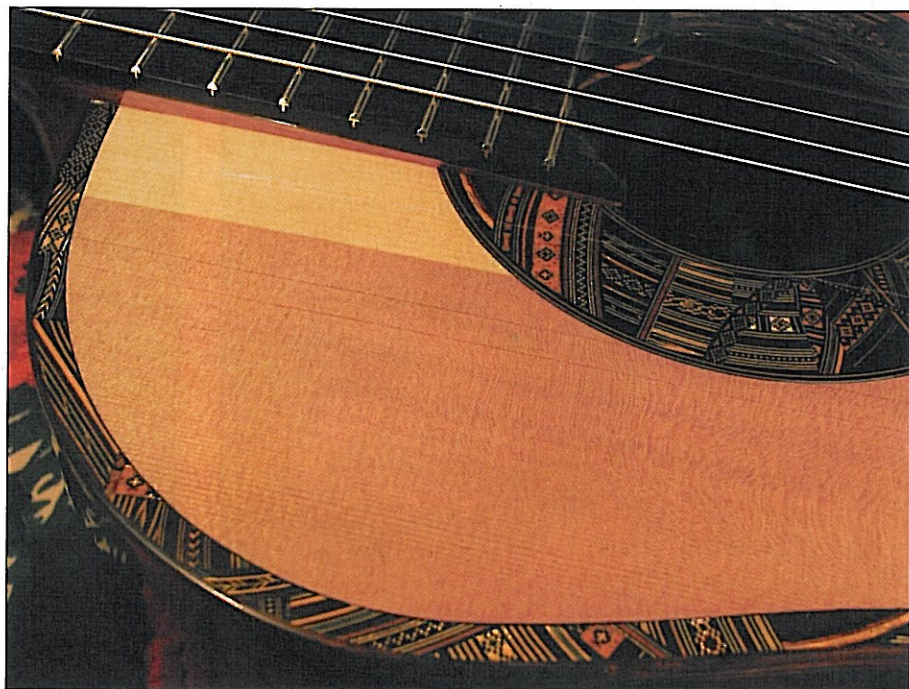
I grew up in a very different Florence than the Renaissance theme park most tourists are allowed to see now. In those days, it was a place where the social fabric was completely different. Throughout the neighborhoods, homes and apartments mingled with craftsmen's and artists' workshops. Certain streets carried such a strong perfume of cirmolo pine — which was released from the shops of carvers of picture frames, furniture makers, and sculptors — that the scent took over and



became the leading protagonist of the urban landscape. My father used to take me to museums, but really, art was being created everywhere around us. The bottom floors of many houses in the center of town were occupied by highly skilled artisans, who still employed techniques that had been used since the Renaissance. As a boy, living in the city's center, I liked to spend my afternoons after school building things. I think that's partly because it was in the DNA of my city to create things, and partly because there was very little green open space to play in. There was a little room in our house for the fiery boiler and coal to heat it. It was very dirty and dusty, so I could make as much mess as I wanted. This was the place where I could give tangible shape to my fantasies.

What did you make?

Every kind of thing. Using the most diverse materials — tin cans, shoe boxes, pieces of wire, scrap wood — but at that time it was not like it is now. Now it is easier to find junk like wooden and cardboard packaging; then it was harder to find. Nowadays people make a big deal about recycling, but in those days people really recycled everything directly; some collected



BOTH THIS PAGE BY PATRICK KILKENNY

wood for their fires; others collected cardboard and paper to earn money selling it by weight. To have a wooden shipping crate was a big treasure for me! The best part of Christmas for me was to shave all the branches off the tree so I could carve totem poles, inspired by a book that my brother had given me. I went on to sculpt other figures, like a statue of my cat. When workers came to restore old parquet floors I would collect all the old pieces of wood and build things with them.

Did you build musical instruments as a child?

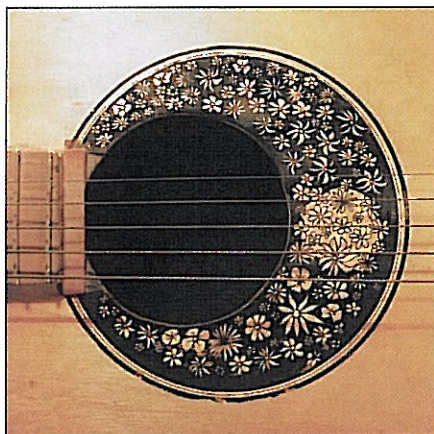
It's quite strange. While I did a lot of things that most kids commonly do — making go-carts and little treasure boxes, tinkering with motors — there was one unusual interest of mine that kept resurfacing. From a very early age I wanted to make musical instruments. Before I went to school I hung around at my uncle's sawmill — he had a little semi-industrial sawmill, with a few workers. I remember that from a square piece of plywood they were cutting out toilet seats, and they let me have the outside scrap pieces. Of course, like every child, I was fascinated with hammer and nails, so by nailing some pieces together and attaching some fishing line, I made a kind of lyre. I used to go around the house like a little Greek poet, strumming on it, annoying everyone. When I was ten or twelve I started to make a "piano." I found some big pieces of wood with holes in them lying around in the basement, so I started to make a piano out of them. I banged together two or three boards, but I never got around to the strings or anything else that could make those three nailed boards even minimally resemble a piano.

How did your early experiences affect your later development as a luthier?

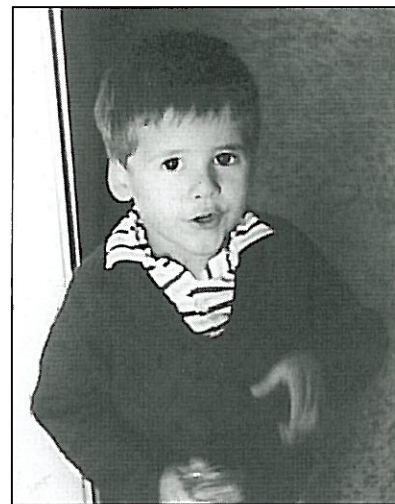
It helped develop my fantasy. If you are used to creating things out of nothing, when you finally have your hands on wonderful material, it's a feast.

When did you make your first guitar, and why a guitar, of all instruments?

My first "guitar" was just a teenage adventure. I was not even thirteen years old when my cousins lent me a Sicilian guitar; it was halfway between a souvenir and a cheap musical instrument. I remember there was a huge, brightly colored plastic swan inlaid in the middle of the soundboard. It was not exactly a great instrument. To tell the truth, it sounded like a chess box with strings. I wasn't very happy with it, so a few years later when I saw the Bee Gees on TV one evening, with one of them playing a gigantic white guitar, the largest I had ever seen in my life, I was thunderstruck. "Bella!" I thought to myself, "I want to build one!!" I sketched a copy of it and later I built a guitar that somewhat resembled it. I used some plywood for the box; the neck I made from a barrel stave; and for the rosette, a friend of mine, an art student, made me an India ink drawing of a flowery field in '70s style. Sometimes I played my guitar in church on Sundays, and I was amazed it made any sound at all. As Socrates said: "Wisdom begins in wonder."



Above: A school friend rendered this fanciful rosette in India ink on Andrea's crude first guitar which he describes as a "teenage adventure." Right: An early photo of Andrea. His nickname at the time, "I' Morino," means "dark-haired child."



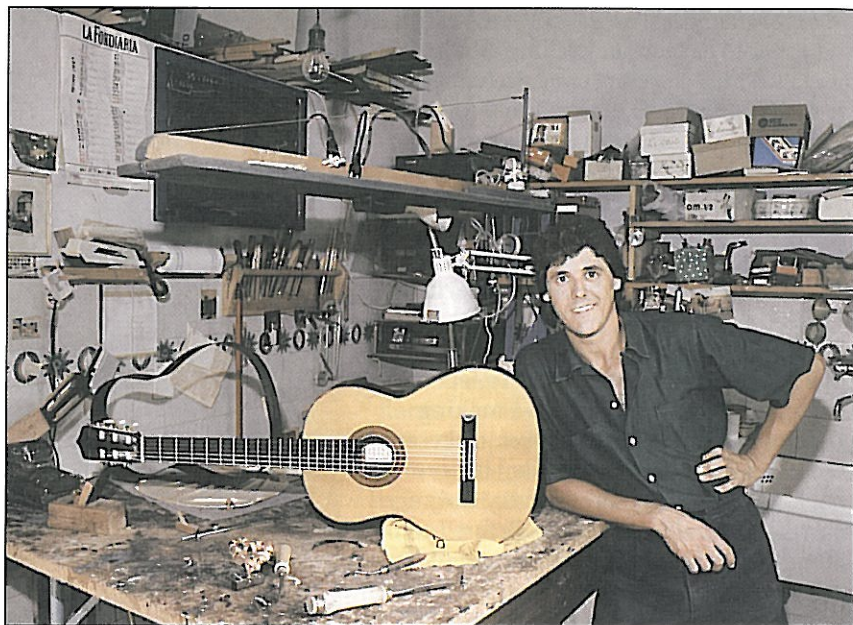
SERGIO TACCHI

Facing page: The Coclea Thucea guitar was built as an homage to Russian composer Alexander Scriabin and features a cedar soundboard with a center section of spruce. The name refers to the spiral structure of the inner ear, and a combination of the Latin names for cedar (Thuya) and spruce (Picea).

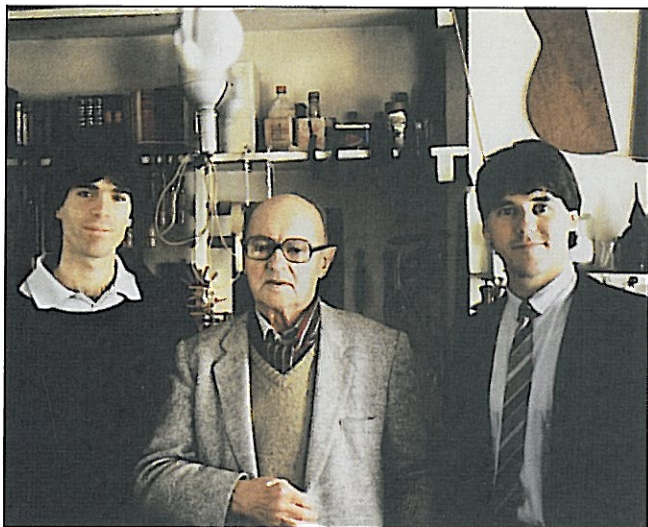


ALL COURTESY OF ANDREA TACCHI EXCEPT AS NOTED

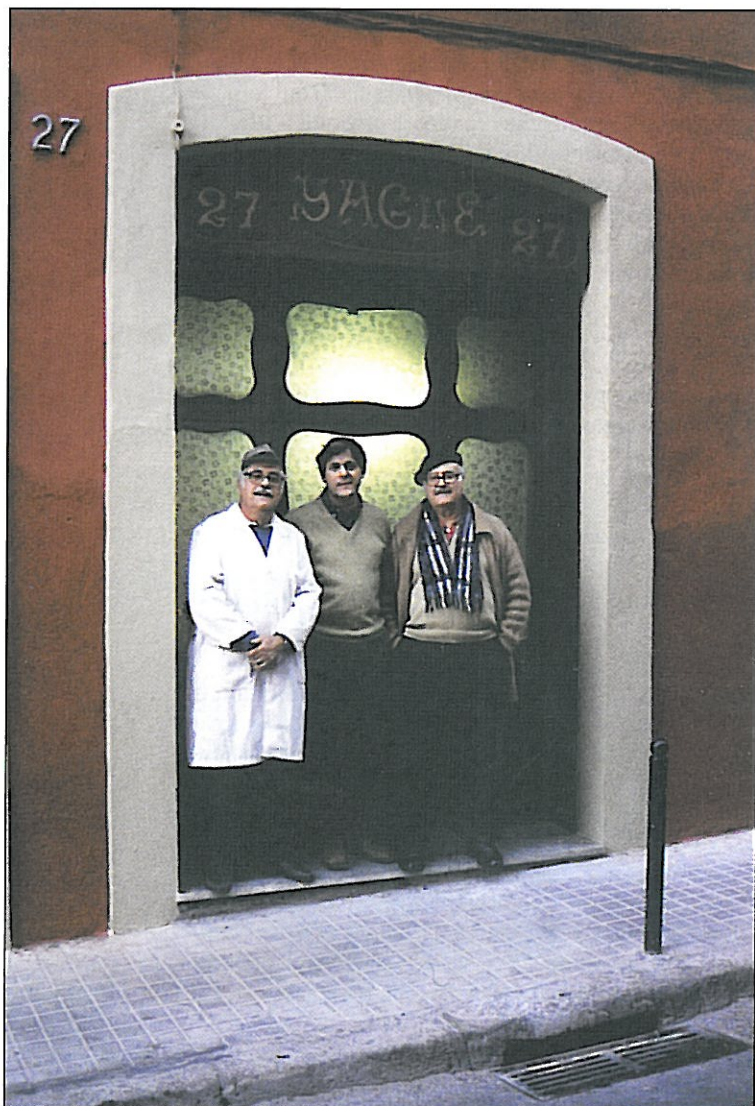
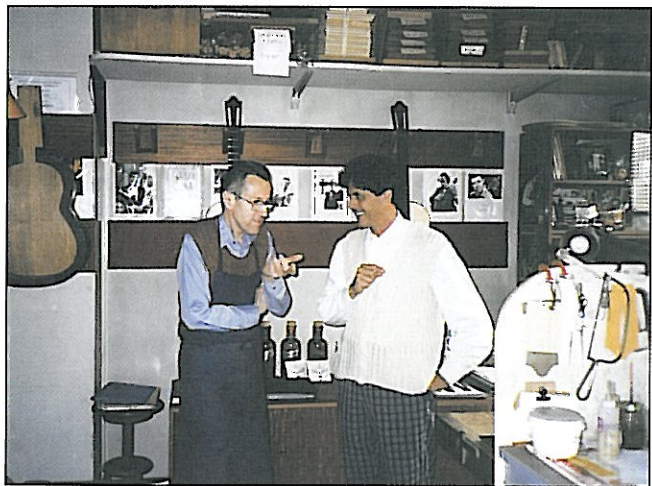
Andrea's first workshop was in the basement of his home (1976–1977). He then moved his shop into this small room in the house built by his great grandfather. This photo was taken in 1995. Since then he has moved the shop into a bigger room in the same house.



Left: Andrea Tacchi proudly poses with the crate holding his first guitar to be delivered. He and the crate are about to get into the Fiat 500 and drive to the shipping office at the Florence airport. Above: Andrea in his workshop, 1985.



Above: Andrea (right) with Robert Bouchet (center), and Michael Jeup (an American guitarist living in Switzerland) in 1985. Below: With Daniel Friederich in 1997. Right: With the Yague brothers in Barcelona, on the trail of Garcia and Simplicio in 2000.



JOHN WEISSENRIEDER

Facing page: Three phases in the construction of a guitar made of Tuscan cypress.

How is it that, from there, you chose to dedicate your life to lutherie?

Soon after the first guitar, in the years that followed, I made five or six more guitars on my own. I was twenty years old at the time and studying engineering, but I felt an irrepressible urge to express myself with my hands and wood. What better way than by making musical instruments, which through their own voices and characters transcend being mere wooden objects and, once created, go on to live lives of their own? It was at this point that I met my first great, unforgettable maestro, Ricardo Brané.

Tell us about Maestro Brané.

Returning to the topic of wisdom, I believe that wisdom lives in the figure of the "Maestro," without whom I think it is impossible to go far. Brané was an Argentinian exile, son of a minister of the former government. Because of the political situation, he was forced to emigrate to the United States, where he studied at MIT. Afterward he moved to Italy, where he worked as an architect. He was a multi-talented person, who, with a book of algorithms and a sketch pad, was capable of explaining the movements of the heavenly bodies, as well as understanding the physical forces at work inside the body of a guitar. By the time I met him in 1977, he was still quite young and living in a 14th-century tower in the Chianti countryside, fifteen miles from Florence. He was in the process of switching from making guitars to making ancient plucked instruments such as lutes and theorbos, wedding his knowledge of science and technology to historic techniques of instrument making. I went to see him a couple of times a month. I never worked in his workshop, but I came to him with many questions and brought my guitars to show him. He was patient with me, very patient. Brané's approach, both scientific and at the same time traditional, has stayed with me my entire life.

How did you support yourself in those early years?

Even though my family had roots as artisans — my great-grandfather was a goldsmith and his brother was a woodcarver and fine furniture maker — my parents would have strongly preferred for me to pursue a more "practical" career path. Nonetheless, I decided to pursue lutherie. But I had to prove to them, and to myself, that I could make a living at it. It was a time when everyone, it seemed, played the guitar, and there was endless repair work to be had. I managed to build five or six guitars a year that I sold for beginner's prices, but repair work was good money, and regular, with which I could buy tools and materials. I repaired everything, from electric bass to acoustic and classic guitars, and restored 18th-century guitars like Fabricatore from Naples and others from Mirecourt in France. I remember, for instance, a Gibson mandolin that had been damaged in the 1966 flood of Florence. It floated around for a while and then sank in the mud. When they brought it to me it was warped, and there was still a mandolin-shaped dirt clod that rattled around inside, visible from the *f*-holes. I took the mandolin and put it in hot water so that it would dissolve the mud, and at the same time, disassemble the instrument completely. As it dried, I gave the mandolin back its original form with the help of a couple of molds that I made for this purpose.





Left: Andrea tests a soundboard using the Lucchi Wood Elasticity Tester, an electronic device that measures the speed of sound in wood. He has been using it since 1984.

Below: The lumberjack luthier beside a spruce log in the Alps, 1999. The trusty Lucchi meter is in the case he is holding.

Facing page: Andrea in his workshop, 1990.

I reshaped the sides with a hot iron and reassembled it. I revarnished it with a red shellac, and the sound was incredibly wonderful.

How long did this period last?

For about ten years, until in 1985 when I won a guitar-making prize in France that launched my career. I will never regret those early years. I find that this training, similar to the internship that a young doctor does in an emergency room at the beginning of his career, helped me develop an agility in resolving any kind of problem and a deeper understanding of how the guitar functions. Like Renaissance artists who often learned as much about depicting human anatomy from the study of a cadaver as from live models, I learned so many different things about the soundboard from repairing a guitar that someone sat on, than I would have from merely building a guitar from scratch. It's like seeing the world upside down. In those days, I worked day and night with infinite enthusiasm.

You have known many luthiers in your life. Can you describe the temperament of a master luthier?

Yes, it's true, I have met some of the greatest and most legendary: Bouchet, Friederich, Field, Ruck, Humphrey, Mattingly, Fleta, Romanillos, José Ramírez III, Marcelino Lopez Nieto, Contreras, Damman, Wagner, Bernabé, Fischer, the Yague brothers, Gilbert, Cohen, Kohno, Matsumura, Imai, and many others. But that would fill several articles and there's not space to speak of them all here. I don't think there is one single temperament that defines all the luthiers I have ever known. It is true that in this craft a person must have an absolute honesty towards his own work and a capacity for infinite self-criticism. In addition, he must desire to create something beyond himself. The master must possess such a deep knowledge of his art that his work is perceived by the world as "style."

As a luthier, in your judgment what is the most important aspect in building a guitar?

All the elements in the construction of a guitar, step by step are important, but if I have to choose the one most significant, it would be the soundboard. The top of the guitar is a functional sculpture, functional in the production of sound. It is a step beyond mere sculpture, in the sense that the first is determined by aesthetic and emotionally communicative qualities; the soundboard will create these characteristics through its



JOHN WEISSENRIEDER



sound and timbre. Naturally, as I said before, the whole of the instrument must also be taken into balanced consideration. But what I mean is that you take many steps to arrive at the willed sound: the choosing of the wood; thickening; bracing; and giving the correct dimensions to the entire structure. This is clearly an artistic process, exactly like taking colors from a palette, mixing and putting them on canvas to communicate to others your emotions.

Speaking of choosing wood. Andrea, I know that you go up into the Alps and cut some of your own wood and that you have woodcutters who help you in this search.

I have gone into the Alps for years to try to find the best spruce. I go to the least-frequented parts of the forest, where there are fewer people and the woodcutters are more willing to help you. I have collected a lot of wood this way over the years, more than I could ever use, and I am still buying. I am always trying to find the right wood to express the sound I want. Furthermore, the wood itself can also inspire me to create a new sound.

To be more precise, I usually look at trees that have already been cut down. It is too difficult to choose the right wood when the tree is still standing. First I look at the cross section to see the yearly growth rings. Second I look at the bark, which tells if there is twist and what percentage of knots I will find on the inside. After I have selected some possible logs, I have the millers make some small samples for me. I take the samples to the hotel to determine the specific gravity of each one and to measure the velocity of sound inside the wood with an electronic device. By making a series of calculations I am able to ascertain what those parameters will be after the wood has aged. If I am satisfied, I will buy one of the logs the next day.

Selection is crucial. Remember that these logs are 60CM-70CM in diameter and 4M long, full of water, and completely frozen; they are heavy as stone. The work required to turn them into guitar soundboards is huge; you must be very careful to choose the right wood.

What do you look for in wood?

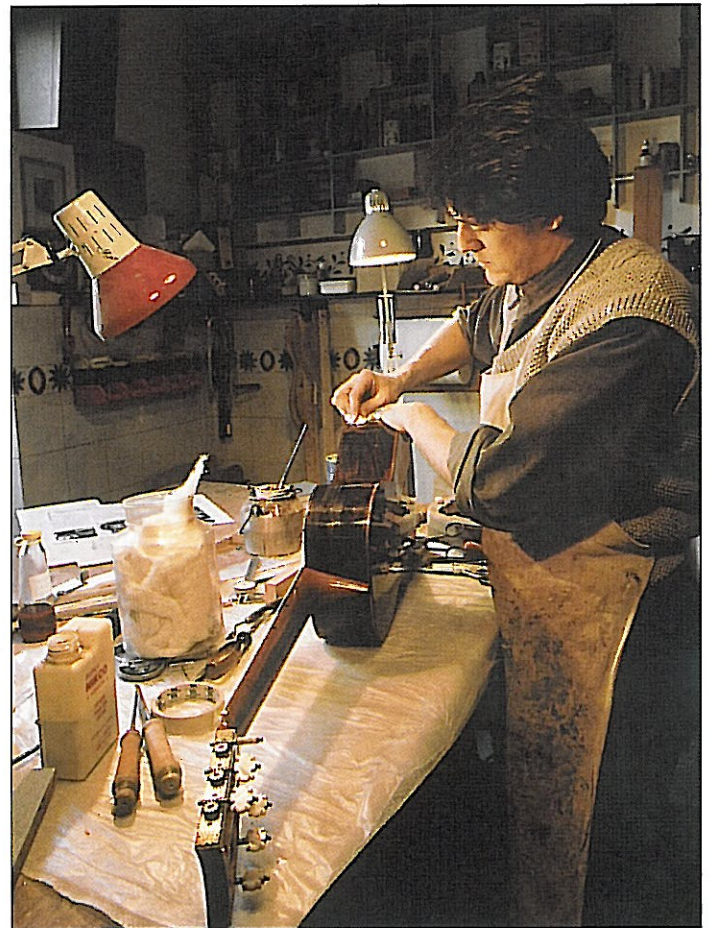
I look for a wood that is light, elastic, and resonant. When you split it, the surface could be defined as luminous, shining with its own light. This kind of wood is more alive; it is as if it has a soul. The vitality that it continues to emanate helps me throughout all the construction process. Material has always been fundamental for the artist, a source of creativity.

What is your opinion of the various soundboard woods?

For the soundboard, I like both cedar and spruce. I use both because they have complementary qualities. This may be why I felt the urge to create the Thucea. Making a comparison with opera, I would say that spruce is to cedar as the soprano is to the tenor. Spruce, like the soprano, is more lyrical, more involved, and reaches the highest point in the opera, the climax, after which, in the opera... she usually dies. In my career I have tried redwood, Sitka, and Engelmann with good results, but I have preferred to remain concentrated on cedar and Italian spruce.

What kinds of woods do you like for the rest of the guitar?

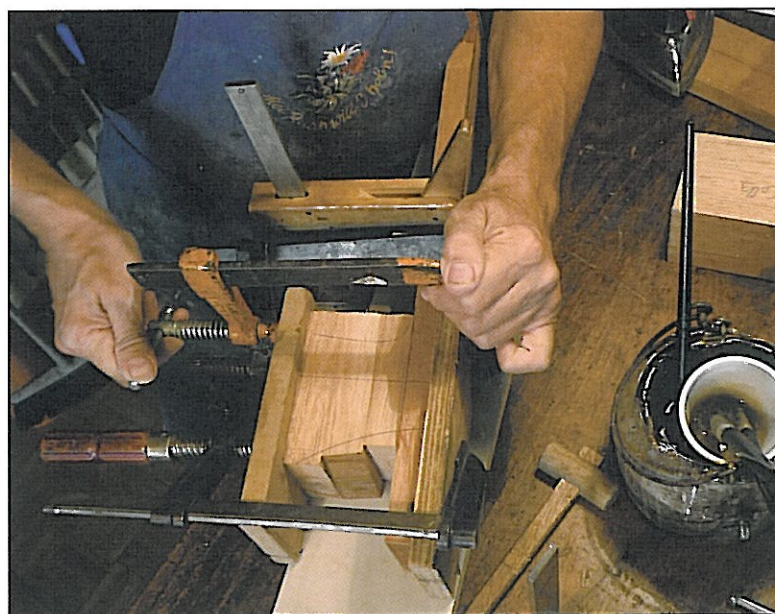
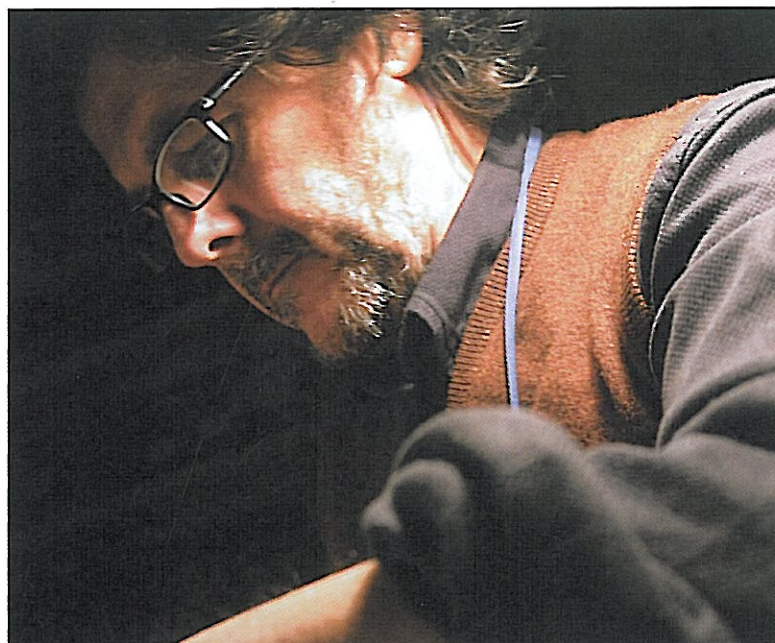
I have used all kinds of wood: cypress, maple, every kind of rosewood, some Paraguayan mahogany, satinwood, and wenge, with optimal results. Of course, the wood you use on the back influences the final tone of the instrument, as does the



wood you use for the neck and the heel. In my opinion, these four elements — back, sides, neck, and top — need to be combined by taking into consideration their relative quality, weight, and dimension. All these come together to produce the final timbre.

What advice would you give a young guitar maker?

If you are not stubborn as a mule, forget about it. Become a plumber. A guitar maker is like a one-man band. He starts in the forest and ends up taking a plane to fly to the other part of the world. In the middle there is all the labor. It is not only the physical work of creating a well-made beautiful guitar — that is only part of the process. Studying, developing aesthetic taste in order to achieve the artistic conception of your guitar — this takes years and years to mature and this is what it takes to become a master. But if someone really wants to become a luthier, I would simply repeat the advice that more than one Spanish guitar maker gave me when I visited there in 1982: *"Mucho trabajo, mucho madera."* And if I were to add something of my own, I would say: When you make a guitar, don't stop by just making a lovely wooden box that produces sound. A guitar is different; it needs to live a life of its own. It is a mirror of your soul, reflecting how you think of life and your values. You should breathe life into the guitar and let it go out on its own into the world. —



Andrea's son Giovanni recently took these photos of a day's work in the Tacchi studio.

ALL THIS PAGE BY GIOVANNI TACCHI