

# Kings of Spain

Continuing our look at the world of the nylon-string guitar, *Guitarist* travels to Madrid to uncover the story of one of Spain's most historic brands, Manuel Rodriguez. Closer to home we speak to David Whiteman, one of the UK's new classical makers

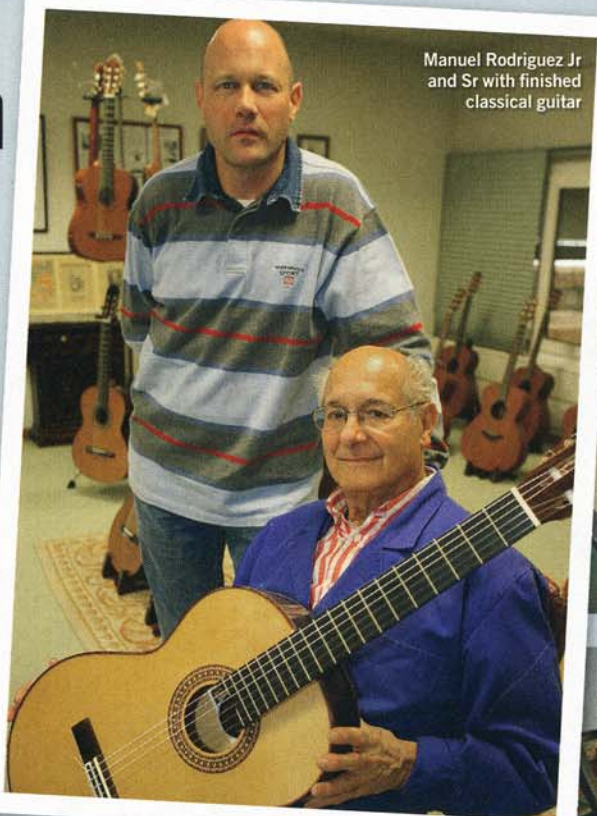
Words and pics Dave Burrluck

While it's easy today for a company to invent a Spanish-sounding name and plonk it on a range of Far Eastern-made instruments, you can't buy authenticity. Manuel Rodriguez has authenticity when it comes to the manufacture of classical guitars, and quite a story to tell. The now 80-year-old is the "spiritual leader" of the company that bears his name and boasts over 100 years of guitar making. His father, born to Flamenco-performing parents, started making guitars in 1905, when 18 years old, and apprenticed at Agustin Andre's workshop in Madrid. Julian Gomez Ramirez, who became José Ramirez's "first handyman", worked there too and, when both Julian and José relocated to Paris soon after, Rodriguez joined them. He remained working with Gomez until the start of WWI when he returned to Madrid and began working at Jose Ramirez I's workshop at the fabled 2 Concepción Jerónima Street address in Madrid, where the Ramirez family firm remained until 1995.

It can't have been an easy time. Guitar sales were seasonal and Europe, politically and socially, was far from stable. Rodriguez became something of a varnishing specialist and continued working with the Ramirez firm (now owned by Ramirez II) until 1930. The Spanish civil war again interrupted the craft but after its end in 1939 Ramirez II set up again employing Marcelo Barbero, Manuel Rodriguez and his 13-year-old son, also Manuel Rodriguez, as 'apprentice' (although he wasn't allowed to officially work until he was 14). Money was tight and the young Rodriguez was advised by his father to look for another profession. But by 1941 he'd been accepted as a proper apprentice with Ramirez and his future path was chosen.

The enterprising lad soon set up his own workbench at his family home (Marcelo Barbero lived above) and by 1944 was making his first guitars at night after working for Ramirez all day. He sold his first guitar in 1945 (for 500 pesetas) and with the proceeds bought a tailor-made suit.

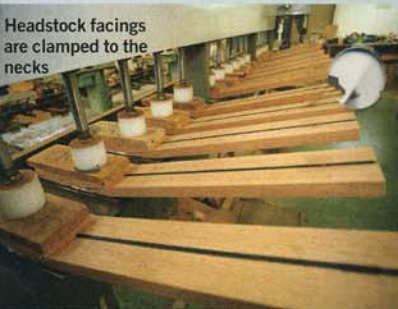
By 1955 Rodriguez had set-up on his



Manuel Rodriguez Jr and Sr with finished classical guitar



A spruce soundboard with its fan bracing in progress



Headstock facings are clamped to the necks



Rodriguez Sr with the bracing pattern used on the FG and FC models



Rodriguez Sr shows off the heated side-bending jigs



**"Just four to five per cent of our guitars use cypress now. It's expensive and has to be solid so it's for our professional guitars"**

Manuel Rodriguez Sr

own and in 1959 emigrated to the USA, a year after his father had died. Rodriguez had success there until 1973 when he returned to Madrid where his sons Manuel and Norman, as they grew up, caught the guitar-making bug.

A decade later the younger Manuel Rodriguez was keen to expand the business. Already Rodriguez was commissioning factory built guitars, made in Spain, to be sold in its Madrid shop while Manuel also toured Europe selling them. In 1986 the company returned to the USA where it exhibited at the NAMM show and subsequently saw Fender take on North American distribution of the instruments. In 1994 the family decided to start its own factory – Manuel Rodriguez And Sons – in Illescas, just outside of Madrid, before moving to the current location in Esquivias, about halfway between Madrid and Toledo.

## Continuing tradition

As *Guitarist* arrives at the factory we're met by the 80-year-old Manuel Rodriguez senior who still has an active role in the company he founded and still hand-makes a very limited number of guitars in the traditional Spanish method – the special-order M Rodriguez Sr Pro Classic Rio Guitar costs £12,449, although the start-up factory-made guitar is only £159!

Before long he's showing us his hand-making area – almost a museum of woods and tools of the traditional Spanish maker. He shows us some lumps of cypress, used for backs and sides of guitars, which he got from the famous Aranjuez Royal Palace gardens in 1956. "You can't cut it down," he says. "It was blown down in a storm... then they called the guitar makers."

"Just four to five per cent of our guitars use cypress now," he continues.

MEET YOUR MAKER: RODRIGUEZ/WHITEMAN



The traditional method of clamping a two-piece back with wedges and string



Hand-shaping the heel cap



'Rope' wrapped around the body holds the binding and purfling



Trimming the excess back and top in an automated process



Fret slots are cut on a multi-blade table saw

"It's expensive and has to be solid so it's for our professional guitars. A student flamenco will typically use maple."

It's a surprisingly large and roomy factory – an ex-window-making facility – and is a long way from the small workshop Manuel Rodriguez originally inhabited in Madrid. Although the factory-made guitars are built very much in the traditional Spanish style, the jigs and fixtures have been modernised to facilitate production. A large CNC is used for neck shaping and Rodriguez shows us his side-bending machines for the solid sides (the laminated sides are fabricated out of house). When wetted, flat sides are put into a pressurised, heated jig that presses the sides to the exact shape and holds them for six to seven minutes. Not like the old days. "No!" laughs Manuel, producing a hollow metal tube – his original side-bending

heater. "I used to fill it with hot coals."

Procuring woods in Madrid in the late forties was extremely difficult. Now, of course, things are very different – although the woods used are still based on tradition. "We use more cedar than spruce for tops," offers Rodriguez. "It comes from the US." It shouldn't be confused with the cedar traditionally used for the neck construction. "No, the tops are west coast Western Red Cedar," clarifies Rodriguez, "the neck wood is Honduras cedar, a tropical wood. It's more expensive but lighter than mahogany and very stable. Mahogany would be too heavy for a flamenco guitar." Indeed the lightness of build of a concert classical, let alone an even lighter-built flamenco, is a stark contrast to the steel-string guitar.

A wave of modernism pervades the construction process. Hydraulic clamps, with heated plates, hold down



**A wave of modernism pervades the construction process. "It's much better"**

Rodriguez Sr

headstock facing veneers – "it's much better than how we used to do it by hand," says Rodriguez. He shows us how the soundhole is cut on a drill press with a special circular cutter that also cuts the rebate for the rosette – all in one action. "That job would have taken me three hours in the old days," says Rodriguez. And while Rodriguez would have spent many, many hours planning and scraping the tops, backs and sides to precise thickness, today it's done on a large sanding machine. The light fan braces and struts of the top are glued in place with a vacuum press – another time saving fixture. Once the 'box' has been assembled and glued the overhanging edges of the top and back are trimmed, simultaneously, in an automatic cutting process.

But it's not all forward thinking. Later in the process, as the outer bindings and purflings are attached, the

MEET YOUR MAKER: RODRIGUEZ/WHITEMAN



Installing side dots on modern cutaway model



Hand-sanding before final gloss spray



Final top-coat spraying



Initial spraying before bridge is attached



Determining the height of the bridge



Gluing and clamping the bridge

→ assembled body is wrapped like a cocoon with 'rope' – "there's no other way to do it," says Rodriguez, with some pride that an old technique still has a place today.



In his book *The Art And Craft Of Making Classical Guitars*, Rodriguez relates the complexity of making the traditional rosette decoration by hand to reflect the artisan's style. It's almost an art in itself where numerous strips of natural and stained woods have to be scraped down to veneer-like thickness and laminated together to form a block. This is then cut into thin slices that are then trimmed to form a keystone shape that will make up the circular rosette. The Rodriguez family still design the rosettes that they use for the various models, but they're made in Japan.



**"I think there is a market between the steel- and nylon-string guitar. We are in the 21st century after all"**

Manuel Rodriguez Jr

Despite the outwardly oh-so-traditional appearance of the instrument many makers have experimented not only with the size of the instrument and its scale length but also the top bracing. Rodriguez and his sons are no exception. Back in the late fifties Rodriguez developed a bridge with moveable saddles to aid the

intonation compromises of a classical, and we were shown a radical guitar with a lifted fingerboard that sits over the top to promote maximum vibration from the soundboard. Even so, Manuel Rodriguez Jr reflects that it's a highly conservative market. And while the majority of high-end makers will shy away from cutaway models, let alone onboard pickups, Rodriguez produces a number of models that include these features. Here the necks too are slimmer – "we based the shape on a Stratocaster" – and include side-dots. "I think there is a market between the steel- and nylon-string guitar. We are in the 21st century after all."

Nowhere is that more evident than in the finishing area. Gone is traditional French polish and today a modern finish is sprayed on in quite a high-tech manner. There's even an automated buffing machine, alongside the buffing wheels, that polishes two guitars at a

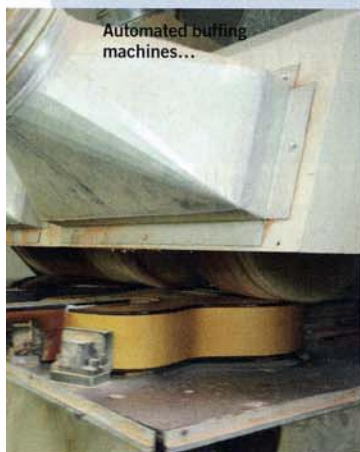
time. Final illustration, if needed, that the craft of the Spanish maker is changing.

**Spain drain**

Spain is still the main school of the classic guitar but "it's suffering now," admits Rodriguez Junior, "there are so many luthiers around the world." The Spanish government doesn't seem to recognise the cultural significance of the guitar either. "They don't see it as important. When we needed to borrow money [to invest in the new factory] we had to go to Holland!"

Rodriguez's frustrations are easy to see. But it's the threat of overseas competition that occupies him more pressingly, even though the guitar-making family has survived two World Wars, a civil war, the Japanese 'invasion' of their craft and now China flooding every market with low-cost instruments. To combat the latter,

## MEET YOUR MAKER: RODRIGUEZ/WHITEMAN



Automated buffing machines...



... and more traditional hand-buffing

Final fretwork before the guitar is shipped



→ Rodriguez has been working with a factory in China that now produces the start-up Caballero models. Currently Rodriguez creates some 15,000 guitars a year – with a work force of 40, all trained by Rodriguez – in the main Spanish-made range and some 2-3,000 are being fabricated in China. Around 95 per cent of all Rodriguez guitars are exported – with approximately 25 per cent going to the USA.

"If we hadn't have done the Chinese thing we'd have been bankrupt," is the junior Manuel Rodriguez's real-world comment. "But you must realise that although the guitars are made in China, from our woods, they are shipped back here where we finish them. We'll continue to work with the Chinese to produce our low-end models but we don't plan to switch any more models from Spain to China. We're constantly looking at ways to streamline and modernise our factory and also at new guitar designs and innovations."

'Rich in sound, rich in history, rich in beauty,' runs the Rodriguez marketing slogan – and 'good at surviving' might be an apt adjunct. **■**

For further info on Manuel Rodriguez guitars contact JHS 01132 865381 [www.jhs.co.uk/rodriguez.html](http://www.jhs.co.uk/rodriguez.html). David Whiteman can be contacted on 01273 453 583; [info@whitemanguitars.co.uk](mailto:info@whitemanguitars.co.uk)



**"We'll continue to work with the Chinese to produce our low-end models but we don't plan to switch any more models from Spain to China"**

Manuel Rodriguez Jr



Whiteman in his workshop with a finished Standard Concert Classical

### An English connection

#### The influence of the classical and flamenco master has spread worldwide. We drop in on the UK's David Whiteman

Based close to Brighton, David Whiteman's reputation within the 'English School' of classical makers is well established. Like many modern makers he studied at the London College Of Furniture and, after setting up his own workshop, was appointed for an eight-year stint as senior lecturer in guitar making at London Guildhall University before concentrating fully on building his own instruments. He's made some 150 guitars to date, charges around £3,000 per instrument, and now has a nine-month waiting time.

Although Whiteman builds in the Spanish tradition he's recently been working with musicians like Richard Chapman to produce a decidedly non-traditional 'Drop Shoulder' 13-fret-to-the-body neck-joined classical. "We had to look back to the traditions before we went forward," he reflects. "Aesthetically we stuck with traditional motifs. But Richard plays with a plectrum – I've had difficulties with that. It's a very different playing style." Steve Topping is another plectrum-playing Whiteman user. "He's using the wooden Dugain picks. I was really surprised to hear the difference in tone between the different materials they're made from. I'm learning a lot..."

Extended necks... plectrums... it sounds more like a steel-string. "But the classical's top has much lighter bracing, there's no truss rod, a wider fingerboard width, higher action due to the lower tension strings. Overall the classical is built much more lightly and the bridge takes on a different tension compared to a pin bridge. I'm looking for clarity, tonal variation and response, not so much sustain – which can be a problem with traditional classical playing in terms of damping. The classical guitar sound is a combination of lighter, lower tension strings, a quicker more pronounced attack and a quicker decay."

Fitting onboard pickups and preamps

isn't favoured, however, by Whiteman.

"Electros are a compromise and every one has been intrusive and takes something away. I'd recommend a lower quality guitar if you want to do that."

The vast majority of Whiteman's guitars are more traditional. Along with the Drop Shoulder, Whiteman makes two other styles: a Standard Concert Classical – "the instrument that I love first and foremost" – and a smaller bodied guitar "in the spirit" of Hauser (and inspired by a 1936 original). His favoured materials are the classic Brazilian rosewood/spruce mix.

"I mainly use European spruce, occasionally Sitka and cedar. To my ears European spruce is more subtle and more versatile." His preferred neck wood is South American 'cigar box' cedar – the traditional Spanish choice, though particularly on the Hauser-style Whiteman is using mahogany more, simply because Hauser did too.

Whiteman is focused on what he's looking for sound-wise: "a clarity and evenness of response, something behind the note, something with depth and resonance – a luminosity," he says. "There is an X-factor: guitars that are phenomenal but then you have to try and work out why. I know how to get a certain response – it might be arrogant but I guess that's experience."

The finish is another controversial area of the nylon-string. Whiteman uses traditional French polish. "It requires very little maintenance, just wipe off your guitar after playing. It definitely needs more care and will take nail marks more readily. If it needs cleaning just use a cloth dampened with water."

The subject of accurate intonation is a hot debate too. Whiteman, like many, never considered 'improving' this until he saw and heard the work of Bill Puppelt, who's been working on a compensated intonation system for many years. "I was embarrassed that I've never done it," says Whiteman.

Does he feel hampered by tradition? "Yes and no. There is scope to develop, but although the cutaway is seen as a radical thing, why not? Just because it's a departure doesn't make it wrong."